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AN OUTLINE ANALYSIS

OF

SORDELLO



S O R D E L L O

AN OUTLINE ANALYSIS OF
MR BROWNING'S POEM

BY

JEANIE MORISON

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'THE PURPOSE OF THE AGES;' 'GORDON: AN OUR DAY IDYLL;'
'ANE BOOKE OF BALLADES,' ETC.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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TO
THE MEMBERS OF THE
EDINBURGH WOMEN-STUDENTS'
BROWNING CLUB,
FOR WHOM IT WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN,
THIS SLIGHT ANALYSIS OF
A GREAT POEM
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

SCENE II

SCENE II. — A ROOM IN THE HOUSE OF THE LATE LORD OF THE MANOR. — A LADY, A GENTLEMAN, AND A SERVANT.

LADY. — What a strange sight to see!

GENTLEMAN. — Yes, indeed, my lady.

LADY. — All this time, I have been thinking of the old man, and how he used to be so kind to me. And now, when I am in the house of the late lord, I find that he has left me nothing but a few scraps of his old letters. And how I wish I could see him again, and hear his voice, and feel his hand. But alas, he is dead, and I am alone. And how I wish I could see him again, and hear his voice, and feel his hand. But alas, he is dead, and I am alone.

“SORDELLO.”

“SORDELLO” is by common consent the most difficult of Mr Browning’s poems. Every one knows the famous *mot* that there are only two intelligible lines in it—the first,

“Who wills may hear Sordello’s story told ;”
and the last,

“Who would has heard Sordello’s story told ;”
and that *they* are not true !

And, for the ordinary cursory indifferent reader, one must admit that there is some truth in the impeachment. Even an intelligent reader, with a sincere desire to get at the meaning of the poem, is apt to rise from a first reading of it with a sense of strange bewilderment, a hopeless feeling of being able to make “neither head nor tail of it” as a whole, a sensation of having caught glimpses of brilliant lightning-flashes of the divine fire making only the more appreciable the denseness of the darkness around.

But let not such pause here in discouragement,—having put their hand to the plough, let them not look back, but patiently read and re-read passage by passage, till each separately grows luminous,—as it will,—and then read and re-read the whole, and by-and-by I think they will find, as their eyes become accustomed to their environment, that, as in Mr Browning's own description of David in Saul's tent,

"At the first I saw nought but the blackness; but soon I descried
A something more black than the blackness—the vast,
the upright
Main prop which sustains the pavilion; and slow
unto sight
Grew a figure against it, gigantic and blackest of all.
Then a sunbeam, that burst thro' the tent-roof, showed
Saul."

There are several things which conspire, like the double-folded curtains of Saul's tent, to produce this obscurity through which our eyes have to be trained to discern the great sad central figure of the poem, who, like the first king of Israel,

"Both arms stretched out wide
On the great cross-support in the centre, . . .
. . . hangs there as, caught in his pangs
And waiting his change, the king-serpent all heavily
hangs,
Far away from his kind, in the pine, till deliverance
come
With the spring-time."

In the first place, Mr Browning, as is not unusual with him, has chosen an almost obliterated name,—in this case a name which might have been great and famous but was not,—as the figure for whom he has bid

“The dim

Abysmal Past divide its hateful surge,
Letting of all men this one man emerge,—

Sordello, thy forerunner Florentine,
A herald star,”

absorbed relentless into “the consummate orb” that followed it,

“It’s shy element blent utterly,”

until they are

“Named now with only one name,”

—that of Dante. Until Mr Browning’s poem brought him once more before the world, few English readers at least knew anything of Sordello beyond the short mention of him as recognised as a fellow-townsmen by Virgil in Dante’s “Purgatorio.”

The second reason for the obscurity of the poem is, I think, that the scenes which form the ever-shifting phantasmagoria of its background lie chiefly among the minor incidents of an old-world conflict, which, except in its leading outlines, has to the general reader long since passed with its actors and its incidents into the dim limbo of a forgotten past; and we find ourselves suddenly transported on the wings of Mr Browning’s imagination into the midst of a twelfth-

century world, among whose eager interests and living actors Mr Browning is quite at home, while the uninitiated reader finds himself hopelessly bewildered in a veritable *terra incognita* among people whose names convey to his mind no idea, and who speak in, to him, an unknown tongue.

There is yet, I think, a third reason for the difficulty of the poem, which, added to the other two, acts on many a reader as the proverbial "last straw which breaks the camel's back," and that is the involved structure of the poem itself. It opens with a scene which formed indeed a turning-point in its hero's career, but which in point of time occurred very near its close, and before we have the explanation of this opening scene we have to be initiated into all the previous experiences of life which led up to it.

A poem so constructed, with such a hero and such a background, could hardly fail to be obscure, and when we add to all this the subject-matter of the poem—the inner life of a Soul, and that Soul a Poet-soul,—the many digressions and parentheses,—and Mr Browning's dramatic instinct to write *from* the consciousness of his actors,—which his penetrating poetic insight often renders a subtle and unlooked-for consciousness—rather than *to* the consciousness of his readers,—we need not greatly wonder that many even of his most ardent disciples have given up "Sordello" as a hopeless problem—too hard a nut to crack, however valuable the kernel it contains. But hard as it is, we believe the nut to be crackable, and the kernel well worth the trouble. Let us see whether we can

make good our belief, and one by one raise the heavy-folded curtains that darken the tent, till by-and-by

“A sunbeam through the roof shows Saul.”

First, then, who was Sordello? What is the historical basis of this great dim tragic figure which Mr Browning's genius has called from the “vasty deep” of a long-forgotten past? To most of us he is known, as I have said, only as the dim majestic spectre whom Virgil and Dante meet in the Purgatorio, and from whom they inquire the “ascending path” from thence.

“‘But who is he,’ I asked, ‘whose steadfast look
Observes our progress, from that craggy nook?
Perhaps he'll deign to point the ascending path.’
In stern solemnity the Spirit stood,
An inborn dignity of soul he showed
Yet unextinguished by the hands of Death.

Askance; and as a couchant lion eyes
His thoughtless victim when he means surprise
The Shade perused us; when, approaching near
The gentle Bard inquired the ready way.
The Ghost demurred, but bade us first display
What cause had led us from the Nether Sphere.

But when the name of Mantua first he heard
The melancholy Shade his visage cleared,
And to the Bard descending from his post
With a faint gleam of nascent joy he came
And cry'd, ‘Our native country is the same,
I was Sordello once, on Mincio's coast.’”¹

¹ Dante's Purgatorio. Translated by the Rev. Henry Boyd.

The problem which, as it seems to me, Mr Browning's poem sets itself to solve is—

How did Sordello get there? Why does Dante assign him as his companion-shades those numbered among the negligent whom Death overtook before their repentance was complete? Why was his life on earth a failure? What "scared this Herald Star" from—

"Its right to roll along
A sempiternal path with light and song
Fulfilling its allotted period,
Serenest of the progeny of God"?

How does it come about that his name and fame have been absorbed in another's? That he himself has his place not in the "Paradiso" but in the "Purgatorio"?

Dante's poem is, I think, clearly the exciting cause of Mr Browning's; and in order to answer the questions which Sordello's place in it raises, he follows with a subtle analysis the earthly life of this man, with its bearing on what he himself assigns as the *raison d'être* of the poem, "the incidents in the development of a soul." How much exactly of the story is history, how much the imaginative insight of the poet, it would require Mr Browning's own familiarity with the archives of the British Museum on the subject definitely to determine. We have, however, the main outlines of Sordello's life and character, and of the shifting historical background against which this great dim spectre whom Mr Browning has summoned back from the Under World, played his earthly part, in con-

temporary records, and it is necessary to an intelligent understanding of the poem to look first for a little at these.

Who then was the historical Sordello, and what the surroundings of his earthly history? In Sismondi's 'Literature of Europe' we find mentioned among the early Troubadours, one "Sordello of Mantua," born at Goito near Mantua, and said to have been among the first to have adopted the ballad form of writing. Thirty-four poems of Sordello's have been collected by M. de la Curne de Sainte Palage, fifteen of them love-songs. Some of these are written in a pure and delicate style, but some (so says Sismondi) betraying a coarseness little worthy of admiration. Among his other pieces is a funeral eulogium on the Chevalier de Blanca, an Aragonese Troubadour, whose heart Sordello says should be divided among all the sovereigns of Europe, to supply them with the courage of which they stood in need. In another poem we find him declining to follow the Crusade to which he was urged by Charles of Anjou, and saying, "Every one is seeking his salvation by sea; but, for my own part, I am not eager to obtain it. My wish is to be transported to another life as late as possible." And in a "tenson,"—one of those extempore poetical contests which were the great ornament of all court festivities in his day,—we find him declaring his preference for the delights of lady-love as compared to the honours of chivalry. The historical surroundings of the days of this not over-heroic minstrel were of the most turbulent. All Italy was convulsed by the rival factions of Guelf and

Ghibellin: the former the cause of the Pope, which was then identified with the cause of the People and of Italian liberty, as represented by the free republics of the Lombard League; the latter the cause of the German Emperor, the aristocracy, and foreign domination.

Having said so much by way of preface, we must try to gather the rest of the history, personal and national, from the poem itself.

The poem opens with the celebrated and much-contested line—

"Who wills may hear Sordello's story told;"

and the task we have set ourselves is to see whether we can prove that that line, in spite of all the gibes to which it has given rise, is nevertheless a truth.

After an address to his audience in which the poet explains his reason for adopting a narrative and not a dramatic form for his poem—

"It seems

Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,
Makers of quite new men, producing them,
Would best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem,
The wearer's quality; or take their stand,
Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand,
Beside him,"—

and an appeal for approval beyond his living audience to the mighty Dead whom he imagines listening, the first scene of the poem itself opens on an autumn evening in Verona six hundred years ago—a lovely sunset burning with a long flare of crimson over the black woods below :—

“A single eye
 From all Verona cared for the soft sky.
 But, gathering in its ancient market-place,
 Talked group with restless group ; and not a face
 But wrath made livid,”—

for the news has just come that their prince, Count Richard of St Boniface, the great stay of the Guelf cause, who had joined with Azzo, the Guelf lord of Este, to thrust the Ghibellin Taurello Salinguerra from his seat in Ferrara, has fallen into Salinguerra's trap and is a prisoner in Ferrara, and the cry has come for

“Immediate succour from the Lombard League
 Of fifteen cities that affect the Pope.
 . . . And, arming for the strife,
 Wide Lombardy, on tiptoe to begin,
 Took up, as it was Guelf or Ghibellin,
 Its cry ; what cry ? ‘ The Emperor to come ! ’”—

the Ghibellin.

“The Pope, for us the People, . . .
 To keep the Kaiser off and dwell with us,”—
 the Guelf.

Then follows a description of the leaders of the two parties—

“Two Principles that live
 Each fitly by its Representative.”
 The Ghibellin “Hill-cat” Ecelin,
 “The gracefulest
 Adventurer, the ambiguous stranger-guest
 Of Lombardy,”
 a cruel sire, who

"Led in

A son as cruel ; and this Ecelin
 Had sons, in turn, and daughters sly and tall,
 And curling and compliant ; but for all
 Romano (so they styled him) throve, that neck
 Of his so pinched and white, that hungry cheek
 Proved 'twas some fiend, not him, the man's-flesh went
 To feed : whereas Romano's instrument,
 Famous Taurello Salinguerra, . . .
 . . . why should not he shed blood
 To further a design ? Men understood
 Living was pleasant to him as he wore
 His careless surcoat, glanced some missive o'er,
 Propped on his truncheon in the public way,
 While his lord lifted writhen hands to pray,
 Lost at Oliero's convent."

These Ghibellin "hill-cats face
 Our Azzo, our Guelf Lion, . . .
 . . . the Church's princely son !"

While this "torch-flame" sunset thus burns over
 its dark woods, and its old market-place is alive with
 excited citizens, and in its Prince's palace the twenty-
 four who rule Verona discuss his capture and their
 plans for his release, the poet leads us

"By clapping doors, with sudden glare
 Of cressets vented on the dark,"

to where behind the palace banquet-rooms, concealed
 by the arras, the wall opens at the touch of a secret
 spring, and we find ourselves in a hidden recess, in
 the company of a solitary figure.

“Does that one man sleep whose brow
The dying lamp-flame sinks and rises o’er?
What woman stood beside him? not the more
Is he unfastened from her earnest eyes
Because that arras fell between! Her wise
And lulling words are yet about the room,
Her presence wholly poured upon the gloom
Down even to her vesture’s creeping stir;
And so reclines he, saturate with her,
Until an outcry from the square beneath
Pierces the charm; he springs up, glad to breathe
Above the cunning element, and shakes
The stupor off as (look you) morning breaks
On the gay dress, and, near concealed by it,
The lean frame like a half-burnt taper, lit
Erst at some marriage-feast, then laid away
Till the Armenian bridegroom’s dying day,
In his wool wedding-robe.”

This is our first glimpse of Sordello—a glimpse of him not at the beginning but at one of the supreme decisive moments of his short career not far from its end,—one of those moments whose decision is a sort of summing up of what his past life has made him; but having shown us this glimpse of the man at his maturity when one of the great questions of life has to be decided, Mr Browning gives us meanwhile no further information, but having first announced the purpose of his poem to

“Disentwine

The under-current soft and argentine ”

of this "herald-star" — this forgotten poet from the "consummate orb" of his great successor which has absorbed it—and "launch once more that lustre," —he takes us back through all the past of Sordello's life which has led up to this supreme moment.

First we find him a solitary boy in the lonely castle of Goito, hid amid the sloughs and pine-forests of the Mantuan territory—

"Just a castle built amid

A few low mountains ; firs and larches hid
Their main defiles, and rings of vineyard bound
The rest"—

utterly secluded from the outer world, which yet lies "but a few hill-tops off." A dim old castle, hiding within it

"A maze of corridors contrived for sin,
Dusk winding-stairs, dim galleries ;"

and innermost within its inmost chambers "a maple-panelled room," where

"Light-graven characters unfold

The Arab's wisdom everywhere . . . slim pillars
Cut like a company of palms to prop
The roof, each kissing top entwined with top,
Leaning together ;"

and beneath,

"A vault, see ; thick

Black shade about the ceiling, though fine slits
Across the buttress suffer light by fits
Upon a marvel in the midst. Nay, stoop—
A dullish grey-streaked cumbrous font, a group

Round it,—each side of it, wherein one sees,—
 Upholds it ; shrinking Caryatides
 Of just-tinged marble like Eve's liliated flesh
 Beneath her Maker's finger when the fresh
 First pulse of life shot brightening the snow.
 The font's edge burthens every shoulder, so
 They muse upon the ground, eyelids half closed ;
 Some, with meek arms behind their backs disposed,
 Some, crossed above their bosoms, some, to veil
 Their eyes, some, propping chin and cheek so pale,
 Some, hanging slack an utter helpless length
 Dead as a buried vestal whose whole strength
 Goes when the grate above shuts heavily.
 So dwell these noiseless girls, patient to see,
 Like priestesses because of sin impure
 Penanced for ever, who resigned endure,
 Having that once drunk sweetness to the dregs."

In this weird retreat, amid its marshes and low
 hills and pine-forests, Sordello—

"A slender boy in a loose page's dress"—
 passes his solitary childhood,—a poet-child—

"Foremost in the regal class
 Nature has broadly severed from her mass
 Of men, and framed for pleasure, as she frames
 Some happy lands, that have luxurious names,
 For loose fertility"—

making playmates in the winter nights of the broidered
 forms on the arras, or crouching in the twilight by the
 marble font-bearers in the mysterious vault, each in
 her turn, till

"A smile stirs her as if one faint grain
Her load were lightened."

You recognise at once in the boy—

"The finer dress
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness
At ear and eye."

A poet-child,—but to which of the two classes of
poets does he belong? To those whose homage turns
outwards, who would "belong to what they worship,"

"Bury themselves, the whole heart wide and warm,
In something not themselves,"—

in whom

"Fresh births of beauty wake
Fresh homage," till "every grade of love is past
With every mode of loveliness; then cast
Inferior idols off their borrowed crown
Before a coming glory. Up and down
Runs arrowy fire, while earthly forms combine
To throb the secret forth; a touch divine—
And the scaled eyeball owns the mystic rod:
Visibly through His garden walketh God."

Or to that other class to whom each new revealment
of beauty seems but a new revealment of their own
soul,—

"So homage other souls direct
Without, turns inward"—

who would stand apart and "laugh at envious fate,
in themselves "equal to being all"? But what if

"A certain mood enervate such a mind,
Counsel it slumber in the solitude

Thus reached nor, stooping, task for mankind's good
Its nature just as life and time accord—
'Too narrow an arena to reward
Emprize!' . . . Or if yet worse befall
And a desire possess it to put all
That nature forth, forcing our straitened sphere
Contain it,—to display completely here
The mastery another life should learn,
Thrusting in time eternity's concern."

Is this plague-spot already to be spied violet-dark on
Sordello as he loiters? Hide it out of sight! All
the possibilities of life are yet before the poet-child.
What

"If Nicolo should carve a Christus yet"?

"Go back to the beginning, rather; blend
It gently with Sordello's life; the end
Is piteous, you may see, but much between
Pleasant enough. Meantime, some pyx to screen
The full-blown pest, some lid to shut upon
The goblin!"

Already there is—

"The little rift within the lute
That by-and-by will make the music mute."

But meanwhile his boyhood glides calmly on in this
secluded castle, which called the Tuscan Adelaide
(second wife of the Ghibellin "Hill-cat"—Ecelin de
Romano III., surnamed "the Monk") its mistress.

Sordello never could remember a time when he had
not lived at Goito.

"Beyond the glades
On its fir-forest border, and the rim
Of the low range of mountain, was for him
No other world ; but this appeared his own
To wander through at pleasure and alone.

.
Some foreign women-servants, very old,
Tended and crept about him. . . .
And first a simple sense of life engrossed
Sordello in his drowsy Paradise."

Investing the inanimate things about him with life
from his own life. "As some adventurous spider," he

" Flung
Fantasies forth and in their centre swung
Our architect,—the breezy morning fresh
Above, and merry,—all his waving mesh
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged.

.
Selfish enough, without a moral sense
However feeble ;—what informed the boy
Others desired a portion of his joy ?"

But—

"Time put at length that period to content
By right the world should have imposed."

And amid his wild-wood sights he feels that he is
alone—

"As if the poppy felt with him !"

While the poppy could minister to him he prized it,—
now that it can no longer supply his needs he casts

it aside. He had given it factitious life from his own soul, true, but why utterly spurn it now that he is disenchanting? Does it not "flaunt you after all, a poppy"?

Alas! our Sordello is not of those who come "not to be ministered unto, but to minister."

"Little boots," he says,
"Beholding other creatures' attributes
And having none!"

Even in giving his sympathy he hopes to fare the better for it himself.

"Alas!" says Browning, "from the beginning Love is whole

And true;—if sure of nought beside, most sure
Of its own truth at least; nor may endure
A crowd to see its face, who cannot know
How hot the pulses throb its heart below;"

whereas souls like Sordello's can do nothing they do not get credit for—

"Must ever live before a crowd."

Love like Sordello's is not this love "whole and true," that thinks only of its object: he is an unconscious actor playing at love,—loving less the supposed object of his love than the rewards of loving. But how is he to contrive this crowd whom he needs to live before?—from these "women just alive that tend and creep about him," or yon archer-troop he catches a glimpse of passing up the defile—the only living beings he comes in contact with?

Not only from the bordered forms of the arras,

and the meek stone-maidens in the vault, nor from Adelaide—the meagre Tuscan mistress of the castle, whom he had surprised one day as he wandered through its arrased glooms, amid quaint robes and weird perfumes, bent double over a scroll, with one maiden sitting at her knee ;—but from the entire out-world, from scraps and snatches, song, story, dream, his imagination makes such a company.

“Strength, Wisdom, Grace on every hand
Soon disengaged themselves, and he discerned
A sort of human life : at least, was turned
A stream of lifelike figures through his brain.”

But what shall fix his gaze ?

“While they live each his life, boast each his own
Peculiar dower of bliss” ?

Which of the various loves prized by those who in their turn are to prize his own amount of loves, is he to expend himself upon ? He sets himself eagerly to study what those whom his crude fantasy supposes notablest among his puppets may please to promulgate as joys, allowing a foreign recognition to stamp the current value — not as he himself finds them joys in his own experience, but authorised “enjoyments,” accepted as such at second-hand ; playing at a counterfeit joy as he played at a counterfeit love. He compares his own life with theirs—“How does my life excel that chieftain’s ?” and comforts himself for his failure to aim one arrow straight as he lets sink from an “aching wrist the rough-hewn ash bow,” by imagining—

“Straight a gold shaft hissed
Into the Syrian air, struck Malek down
Superbly! Crosses to the breach! God’s town
Is gained Him back! Why bend rough ash bows
more?”

So he returns from the Earth to the Moon—from
futile boy-attempts to emulate his heroes in reality, to
imaginary feats in which he excels them all.

“Thus lives he! if not careless as before,
Comforted! for one may anticipate,
Rehearse the future,—be prepared when fate
Shall have prepared in turn real men whose names
Startle, real places of enormous fames,
Este abroad and Ecelin at home
To worship him; Mantua, Verona, Rome,
To witness it.”

He will combine in himself all the excellences of
all his imaginary heroes—

“Half minstrel and half emperor.”

He means to be perfect—say Apollo; and since
Apollo must one day find Daphne, he will wed the
worthiest in the world; and as what is most difficult
to attain is presumably the best, and he hears much
from the sleepy women about him of Palma, the only
child of Ecelin, by his former wife Agnes Este, whom
Ecelin’s prime instrument, Taurello Salinguerra, has
destined, for political reasons, to be the wife of the
Guelf Count Richard of Saint Boniface—but—

" 'The maid
 Rejects his suit,' those sleepy women boast,"—
 so she, scorning all besides, seems to him the most to
 deserve Sordello; and thus

"Conspicuous in his world
 Of dreams sat Palma!"

But the worst of it is, meanwhile,

"Fate is tardy with the stage
 And crowd she promised. Lean he grows and pale,
 Though restlessly at rest. Hardly avail
 Fancies to soothe him. Time steals, yet alone
 He tarries here! The earnest smile is gone.
 How long this might continue matters not;
 For ever, possibly;"

but that outside events at last give an opening to Sordello.

Adelaide, the Tuscan mistress of the castle, returns
 to Mantua, and with her the games her absence had
 stopped begin afresh, and Trouvere and Troubadour
 carry on their contests at her court.

So ends the first book of the poem and Sordello's secluded dreaming youth.

BOOK II.

OPENS on a day in early spring, when, after long snow,

“ At last

Pink leaflets budded on the beech, and fast
Larches, scattered through pine-tree solitudes,
Brightened, ‘as in the slumb’rous heart o’ the woods
Our buried year, a witch, grew young again
To placid incantations, and that stain
About were from her cauldron, green smoke blent
With those black pines.’ ”

So Eglamor, Adelaide’s troubadour, gave vent to a
chance fancy, whereat Naddo — the poet’s critic—
gravely shakes his head, and says—

“ Beware

Of setting up conceits in Nature’s stead ! ”

Buoyantly Sordello wanders out on this spring morning, full of dreamy hopes wrought in him by reviving nature. Surely to-day’s adventure must bring him to Palma at last ! On he goes—through dew-sprent ferns, across the great morass—after his Palma.

"The verge
 Of a new wood is gained. She will emerge
 Flushed, now, and panting,—crowds to see,—will
 own
 She loves him—Boniface to hear, to groan,
 To leave his suit! One screen of pine-trees still
 Opposes: but—the startling spectacle—
 Mantua this time!"

He emerges out of his dream-world and his forest
 solitudes, under the real walls of Mantua, with

"A crowd
 Indeed, real men and women, gay and loud,
 Round a pavilion! How he stood!"

None of his prophetic dreams have come true. His
 youth has reached its prime, yet where is the homage
 poured upon Sordello?

"Born to be adored,
 And suddenly discovered weak, scarce made
 To cope with any,—cast into the shade
 By this and this. Yet something seems to prick
 And tingle in his blood,"

that says—

"The best of their endowments were ill bought
 With his identity: nay, the conceit,
 That this day's roving led to Palma's feet,
 Was not so vain—list!"

they are shouting "Palma!" Then the curtains of
 the pavilion divide, and "She is there;" and Sor-
 dello looks, expecting that presently *He* will be there
 too—

"The proper *you*—at length,
In your own cherished dress of grace and strength,"

Palma's real mate—

"Most like, the very Boniface!"

But no: a showy man advances. This is not he,
Sordello feels. While the jongleurs shout

"Place

For the best Troubadour of Boniface!"

. . . Eglamor, whose lay

Concludes his patron's Court of Love to-day,"

tells who it is. Obsequious Naddo strings the minstrel's lute—named "*Elys*," to suit his song—and trying to subdue a great smile of pride, Eglamor strikes into his strain. Sordello's brain swims: he knows the story the minstrel's lay recounts—but can the man make no more of it than that? Has he really ceased? Dares he no further? Before the people's frank applause of the song is half done, Sordello is beside him, and has begun the true lay with the true end. On flies the song after the flying story:

"Word made leap

Out word—rhyme, rhyme: the lay could barely keep
Pace with the action visibly rushing past:
Both ended."

Naddo, who at first had tried to hold Sordello back, falls back now aghast, as some Egyptian when the bull he has been goading turns round on him and he sees the scarab under his tongue that proves him the Apis.

"But the people—but the cries,—
The crowding round,—and proffering the prize!
For he has gained some prize.

He seemed to shrink
Into a sleepy cloud, just at whose brink
One sight withheld him. There sat Adelaide
Silent; but at her knees the very maid
Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,
The same pure fleecy hair; one weft of which,
Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
She leant, speaking some six words and no more.
N —He answered something—anything; and she
126 Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
Upon him, her neck's warmth and all."

He knows no more till he awakes

"At home; the sun shining his ruddy wont;
The customary birds'-chirp—but his front
Was crowned—was crowned! Her scented scarf
around

His neck. What gorgeous vesture heaps the ground?
A prize? He turned, and peeringly on him
Brooded the women-faces, kind and dim,
Ready to talk. 'The jongleurs in a troop
Had brought him back. . . .
'Eglamor,' they heard, 'was dead for spite,
And Palma chose him for her minstrel.'"

Sordello spends a week sucking the sweetness from
it all, and ruminating:—

"Strange! A man
Recounted an adventure, but began

Imperfectly—his own task was to fill
The frame-work up, sing well what he sang ill.”

But would Sordello ever have turned from Elys to sing about Elys—from a fit of rapture to contrive a song of it, for mere pleasure in the act of singing? though it is true in doing so, this snatch or the other had helped him to find new treasure in himself, soaring by means of it to many a new hoard of fancies. Then, why should men applaud such a performance if they have fancies too? Could it be they found a beauty in the poor snatch itself, such as this—

“Take Elys, there,
Her head that’s sharp and perfect like a pear,
So close and smooth are laid the few fine locks
Coloured like honey oozed from topmost rocks
Sun-blanced the livelong summer”?

If these rhymes made Elys real to them, so that they loved her as he did, who seemed to have run his fingers through the pale locks and let the sun into the cool white skin, no wonder he seemed a god to such! Or did they take it at second-hand on the report of some few like Eglamor, and worshipped what they knew not? Were their fancies slow and indistinct till song interpreted them?

“He pondered this.

Meanwhile, sounds low and drear
Stole on him, and a noise of footsteps, near
And nearer, and the underwood was pushed
Aside, the larches grazed, the dead leaves crushed
At the approach of men.”

They are bringing Eglamor to sleep in the woodlands far from the scene of his forlorn defeat, Naddo leading the scanty company, jongleurs and trouveres chanting at their head—for our beaten troubadour has had his day, and few remain to see him to his grave.

"All along

This man (they rest the bier upon the sand)
—This calm corpse with the loose flowers in his hand,
Eglamor, lived Sordello's opposite."

To him,

"Verse was a temple-worship vague and vast,
A ceremony that withdrew the last
Opposing bolt, looped back the lingering veil
That hid the holy place."

He "belonged to what he worshipped." His fancies did not seem to him, as to Sordello, treasure hid in himself, but something "distinct and far above him."

"He, no genius rare,

Transfiguring in fire or wave or air
At will, but a poor gnome that, cloistered up
In some rock-chamber with his agate cup,
His topaz rod, his seed-pearl, in these few,
And their arrangement finds enough to do
For his best art. Then how he loved that art!"

How he loved that luckless song—

"Twas a fervid child,

That song of his; no brother of the guild
Had e'er conceived its like. The rest you know,
The exaltation and the overthrow:

Our poet lost his purpose, lost his rank,
His life—to that it came.”

Yet so he loved his art that

“Envy sank
Within him, as he heard Sordello out,
. . . and bending down
The same, placed his beneath Sordello’s crown,
Printed a kiss on his successor’s hand,
Left one great tear on it, then joined his band.”

He would go home and sleep with his scorn ;—

“So he slept, nor woke again.”

And now

“They lay the beaten man in his abode,
Naddo reciting that same luckless ode,
Doleful to hear.”

Then Sordello stepped from the covert where he
stood—

“Addressed

Eglamor, bade the tender ferns invest,
Primeval pines o’ercanopy his couch,
And most of all his fame—(shall I avouch
Eglamor heard it, dead though he might look,
And laughed as from his brow Sordello took
The crown, and laid on the bard’s breast, and said
It was a crown, now, fit for Poet’s head).”

So much for Eglamor.

We find Sordello next lying beneath a flowering
laurel-thicket at a May sunrise, filleted and robed as
before, but with a lute beside him on the turf. Hitherto

he had been content with the mystery that surrounded his birth, wrapping his Apollo-fancies only the closer round him, when some wretched whisper seemed to come that his imagined greatness

"All was quite false and sure to fade one day."

But now that at Eglamor's grave he had discovered a reason for his difference from other people, he took no rest till all his old life was explained—alas! the true story soon explained away Apollo! The story amounted to this. When the Counts of Vicenza banished the Vivaresi, the Maltraversi hung about Ecelin reviling him, and he, for spite, fired their quarter, though his own wife Adelaide was in Vicenza, and among the flames of the burning city his son, young Ecelin, was born, and hardly rescued from the roused populace by a poor archer named Elcorte, who leapt into the midst of the flames and saved, at the cost of his own life, the mother and child.

"No creature left except his child to thank."

When the full extent of their escape was known, how Taurello Salinguerra's whole household had been burned, and men had spurned Bishop Pistore's concubines all to pieces in their passion of revenge, Ecelin had taken Elcorte's orphan child Sordello to be nurtured within the blind retreat of Goito, where Adelaide might find shelter when the times were rude. So,

"In short,

Apollo vanished; and a mean youth, just named
His lady's minstrel, was to be proclaimed—

How shall I phrase it?—Monarch of the World!"

On that May morning when Sordello laid aside for ever his dreams of a future endowment of strength and grace which must be his ere he could claim the mastery, to claim mastery *now* in virtue of his simple will, the seal was set upon his life. He is already in his own eyes so superior to his fellow-men that

“Never again
Sordello could in his own sight remain
One of the many”—

never again allow a common law for him and for the crowd.

\ “Himself, inactive, yet is greater far
 Than such as act.”
|

He is a Poet, who, if he *does* nothing, can yet imagine all. He is the slave of no one

“Idea that star-like over lures him on
To its exclusive purpose. . . .
Strong, and to strength turning all energies—
Wise, and restricted to becoming wise.

.
The world shall bow to me conceiving all
Man’s life, who sees its blisses great and small
Afar—not tasting any. . . . Let them perceive
What I *could* do.”

| He will prove to men by the evidence of song that

“Whate’er they are, or seek
To be, I am.”

| So he chooses song as the one vent for himself.

“All right enough, dear monarch,” says Browning—

"Take your ease,
Look on and laugh ; style yourself God alone ;
Strangle some day on a cross olive-stone !"

Only,

"What has our poor world possibly to do with it ?

. . . Why want *us*
To know that you yourself know thus and thus ?

.
Lo ye, the world's concernment, for *its* part,
And this, for *his*, will hardly interfere !"

he thinks—

"Its businesses in blood and blaze this year
But wile the hour away—a pastime slight
Till *he* shall step upon the platform : right !
And, now this much is settled, cast in rough,

.
Slumber, Sordello ! any day will serve"

to prove your kingship.

"Meanwhile eat those sun-dried grapes,
And watch the soaring lark there ! Life escapes
Merrily thus !"

To Sordello, in this mood, comes a missive from
Naddo, urging the new poet to

"Visit Mantua and supply
A famished world."

Arrived there, he finds every one beseeching him for
a song—

"The thrice-renowned
Goito manufacture. Then he found,
Casting about to satisfy the crowd,"

verse—the vehicle he has so lately chosen by which to express himself—prove a sore annoyance, for

“’Twas the song’s effect
He cared for, scarce the song itself. . . .
Praise, not the toilsome process which procured
That praise.”

But (dreams apart) there is no overleaping means for ends. Wooing Song, not for herself but for the praise she wins, he finds coy Song will not come at his call, and,

“I am loth
To say the rhymes at last”

with which he satisfied the crowd were not his own, but Eglamor’s.

“Well, there’s Goito and its woods anon,
If the worst happen ; best go stoutly on
Now,”

thought Sordello. So he went on as best he could, and so he goes on still. You try with your glossaries to-day to get at the intent of his poems, yet never quite find out what it was that struck the people so in them. He caught up abstract qualities, and with a touch or two turned them into men.

“Virtue took form, nor vice refused a shape ;
Here heaven opened, there was hell agape,
As Saint this simpered past in sanctity,
Sinner the other flared portentous by
A greedy people. Then why stop, surprised
At his success ?”

In one way his success was too rapid. Tributes poured in

"Ere he had arranged
Ethereal ways to take them."

He finds himself hankering shamefully after the obvious petty joys of real life, would fain come down from his pedestal and condescend to common pleasures. But to chain himself thus to single joys would frustrate his main design of tasting their quintessence ; therefore

"Each joy must he abjure
Even for love of it.

He laughed : what sage
But perishes if from his magic page
He look because, at the first line, a proof
'Twas heard salutes him from the cavern roof?
'On ! give yourself, excluding aught beside,
To the day's task. . . . Turn the leaf
Thoroughly conned."

Give us something better than these first lays—this unreal pageantry of mere abstract qualities figuring as men. Present us with ourselves now,

"Not portions of ourselves, mere loves and hates
Made flesh : wait not !"

But Sordello does wait. He turns away from his imaginings to improve the language in which he dresses them. That done, he takes an action with its actors—quite forsakes himself to live in each—and then proceeds leisurely to equip their limbs in harness of his workmanship. But alas ! piece by piece

his elaborately wrought armour breaks away. If you want to present a whole Perception, it must not be by thinking about so pure a work of Thought as the language in which it is clothed. Thought and Perception can hardly coexist, Thought being the mere presentiment of Perception,—of the Whole by the Parts. The Poet's business is to *see*, and to sing what he sees; but Sordello tries to rend his Perception into Thoughts, which the crowd, who lack Perception, may tack together; but the crowd's effort to reconstruct, and his own effort to rend his Perception into Thoughts which they may thus reconstruct, alike destroy the Perception. He forsakes the ideal of the Poet as the *Seer*, to take up the lower platform of the mere expounder.

“Are those

I sing to,” he asks, “over-likely to suppose

A higher than the highest I present

Now, which they praise already? be content.”

So he goes back to the old verse for the old praise, and sets about celebrating the exploits of Montfort over the Mountaineers.

30 | The world, whose pleasure is now his only aim, takes
1 | its revenge; it declines even to mistake him for his
meanest hero, still less give him credit for being all
his heroes in one. It only admires

“How a mere singer, ugly, stunted, weak,

Had Montfort at completely (so to speak)

His finger-ends!”

He turns angrily on it. Who are the Mantuans that he should care about their recognition? He had

"Strewed

A fairy dust upon the multitude ;

His giants dignified those puny elves.

. . . In short, he found

Himself still footing a delusive round,

Remote as ever from the self-display

He meant to compass. . . Wherefore then

Continue, make believe to find in men

A use he found not ?

Weeks, months, years went by ;

And lo ! Sordello vanished utterly,

Sundered in twain ;—each spectral part at strife

With each, . . .

The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man."

The Man's part of him, to be fooled no longer by the prize the Poet's part promises of *all* joy which shall drop on him some *no time*, ran eagerly after any passing joy that offered ; while the Poet-part of him

"Sauntered forth in dream,

Dressed anyhow. . . .

Fondling, in turn of fancy, verse ; the Art

Developing his soul a thousand ways—

Potent, by its assistance, to amaze

The multitude with majesties, convince

Each sort of nature, that same nature's prince

Accosted it. . . .

. . . While, out of dream, his day's work went

To tune a crazy tenson or sirvent—

So hampered him the Man-part, thrust to judge
Between the bard and the bard's audience, grudge
A minute's toil that missed its due reward !
But the complete Sordello, Man and Bard,
John's cloud-girt angel—this foot on the land,
That on the sea—with, open in his hand,
A bitter-sweetling of a book—was gone."

Sometimes drawn by the Poet-part, still to

" Leap o'er paltry joys, yearn through
The present ill-appreciated stage
Of self-revelment, and compel the age
Know him."

Sometimes by the Man's part, to

" Forswearing bard-craft, wake
From out his lethargy and nobly shake
Off timid habits of denial, mix
With men, enjoy like men. Ere he could fix
On aught, in rushed the Mantuans,"

with their demands :

" Much they cared
For his perplexity !"

Undecided, he can only fall into a middle course, follow the dull conventions of his day, and submit to the rules prescribed for Palma's minstrel. Then men ask him questions, to which they expect an immediate answer straight from his consciousness.

" Only obliged to ask himself, ' What was,'
A speedy answer followed ; but, alas !

\ One of God's large ones, tardy to condense
 \ Itself into a period."

And he must find some answer that will please his audience at once.

"The end was, he retailed
 Some ready-made opinion, . . . nor too much sought
 If false or true 'twas spoken."

More and more, as he finds he cannot compass a whole,
 he sees less and less to strive about in a tenth part of
 it, and grows more and more contemptuous of men.

"Contrive
 Who could to take eternal interest
 In them?"

So he fared as a Man. As a Poet,

"Verse
 Came only not to a stand-still;"

his poor piece of daily work merely not to sink beneath
 some gad-fly rival! Surely he might compete with
 these at least!

"But—but . . .
 "How should externals satisfy my soul?"

"That's the precise error," says Naddo ;

"The man can't stoop
 To sing us out,' quoth he, 'a mere romance. . . .
 Would you have your songs endure?
 Build in the human heart!—why, to be sure
 Yours is one sort of heart—but I mean theirs—

Ours—every one's ! . . . These are matters one may
probe

Too deeply for poetic purposes.”

So they prattled. So fifty creepers settled staunchly
on him.

“Shame ensued.

Behold the Monarch of mankind succumb

To the last fool who turns him round his thumb !”

’Twas not worth opposing, he thinks, the matter of a
moment. Meanwhile

“Better think

Their thoughts and speak their speech, secure to slink

Back expeditiously to his safe place,

And chew the cud—what he and what his race

Were really, each of them. Yet even this

Conformity was partial. He would miss

Some point, brought into contact with them ere

Assured in what small segment of the sphere

Of his existence they attended him ;

Whence blunders, falsehoods rectify—a grim

List—slur it over ! How ? If dreams were tried,

His will swayed sicklily from side to side,”

he lost even the art of dreaming. Say he sang before
a Mantuan Baron—

“Handsomely reckless, full to running o’er

Of gallantries.”

He tries in his song to

“Abjure the soul, content

With body, therefore.” But “scarcely had he bent

Himself in dream thus low, when matter fast
 Cried out, he found, for spirit to contrast
 And task it duly ;"

and he finds his Count Lori growing into Apollo. So

"Best recall

His fancy ! Then would some rough peasant-Paul,
 Like those old Ecelin confers with, glance" (with dis-
 approval)

"His gay apparel o'er ; . . .

And body clean abolished, soul alone
 Sufficed the Gray Paulician." But "by-and-by," he
 found

"To balance this ethereality,
 Passions were needed, foiled he sunk again."

Meantime (it is time to explain) the world rejoiced,
 because a sudden sickness had set it free from the
 Tuscan Adelaide.

"Missing the mother-bee,
 Her mountain-hive Romano swarmed ; at once
 A rustle-forth of daughters and of sons
 Darken the valley."

While Ecelin Romano, her husband, writes to his
 fighting man, Taurello Salinguerra—who at the time
 of Adelaide's death was at Naples, just going to sail
 the next day, with the Emperor Friedrich, for Syria—

"I am sick too, old,
 Half crazed I think ; what good's the Kaiser's gold
 To such an one ? God help me ! for I catch
 My children's greedy sparkling eyes at watch—

'He bears that double breast-plate on,' they say,
 'So many minutes less than yesterday!'
 Beside, Monk Hilary is on his knees
 Now, sworn to kneel and pray till God shall please
 Exact a punishment for many things
 You know, and some you never knew; which brings
 To memory, Azzo's sister Beatrix
 And Richard's Giglia are my Alberic's
 And Ecelin's betrothed. The Count himself
 Must get my Palma: Ghibellin and Guelf
 Mean to embrace each other."

In short, freed from Adelaide's influence, old, sick,
 and remorseful, Ecelin means to retire from the world,
 forsake the Emperor, make his peace with the Pope,
 and marry his children to Guelfs.

"Never thunder-clap
 Out of Vesuvius' throat, like this mishap
 Startled" Taurello.

With a curse on Adelaide for choosing this time, when
 he was absent, to die, he is off in a trice to Ecelin at
 Vicenza, and,

"Half a score
 Of horses ridden dead, he stood before
 Romano in his reeking spurs."

But it is too late,—the two first betrothals have been
 completed.

"Let me die in peace—
 Forget me," stammers Ecelin. "Do you and Fried-
 rich plot your worst
 Against the Father: as you found me first

So leave me now. Forgive me! Palma, sure,
Is at Goito still. Retain that lure—
Only be pacified!"

The country rang with the news how Ecelin's great servant Taurello had been congéed off and had come to recover breath at Mantua, where, since the death of his girlish Sicilian bride, Retrude, whom he had taken there till the Ferrara palace she never lived to see should be ready for her, he seldom came—although his line was ancient there, and the city is proud of him, and did not forsake him even when he forsook himself and lavished on Ecelin Romano a prowess surely meant for his own growth. So on his arrival in Mantua

"Forward in a trice
Were shows to greet him."

And Sordello is selected to sound the great man's welcome.

"'Tis a test
Remember," says Naddo; "there's plenty hint
Your pinions have received of late a shock—
Out-soar them, cobsman of the silver flock!
Sing well!"

But wonderful to relate,

"Song's no whit
Facilitated.

Fast the minutes flit;
Another day, Sordello finds, will bring
The soldier, and he cannot choose but sing;



So, a last shift, quits Mantua—slow, alone :
 Out of that aching brain, a very stone,
 Song must be struck. . . . Poetry annoys
 Its utmost : wherefore fret ? Verses may come
 Or keep away ! And thus he wandered, dumb
 Till evening, when he paused, thoroughly spent,
 On a blind hill-top : down the gorge he went,
 Yielding himself up as to an embrace.
 The moon came out ; like features of a face,
 A querulous fraternity of pines,
 Sad blackthorn clumps, leafless and grovelling vines
 Also came out, made gradually up
 The picture ; 'twas Goito's mountain-cup
 And castle."

All his old dreams rush back.

" 'Twas Apollo now they lapped,
 Those mountains, not a pettish minstrel meant
 To wear his soul away in discontent,
 Brooding on fortune's malice. Heart and brain
 Swelled ; he expanded to himself again.

.
 . . . Come home, Sordello ! Soon
 Was he low muttering, beneath the moon,
 Of sorrow saved, of quiet evermore,—
 Since from the purpose, he maintained before,
 Only resulted wailing and hot tears.
 Ah, the slim castle ! dwindled of late years,
 But more mysterious ; gone to ruin—trails
 Of vine through every loop-hole. Nought avails

The night as, torch in hand, he must explore
 The maple chamber: did I say, its floor
 Was made of intersecting cedar beams?
 Worn now with gaps so large, there blew cold
 streams

Of air quite from the dungeon; lay your ear
 Close and 'tis like, one after one, you hear
 In the blind darkness water drop. . . .
 . . . Palma was gone that day,

Said the remaining women. Last, he lay
 Beside the Carian group reserved and still.

The Body, the Machine for Acting Will,
 Had been at the commencement proved unfit;
 That [machine] for Demonstrating, Reflecting it,
 Mankind—no fitter: was the Will Itself
 In fault?

His forehead pressed the moonlit shelf
 Beside the youngest marble maid awhile;
 Then, raising it, he thought, with a long smile,
 'I shall be king again!' as he withdrew
 The envied scarf; into the font he threw
 His crown.

Next day, no Poet! 'Wherefore?' asked
 Taurello, when the dance of Jongleurs masked
 As devils ended; 'don't a song come next?'

Naddo explains apologetically—

"His Highness knew what poets were: in brief,
 Had not the tetchy crew prescriptive right
 To peevishness, caprice? or, call it spite,

One must receive their nature in its length
And breadth, expect the weakness with the
strength.' . . .

The easy-natured soldier smiled assent,
Settled his portly person, smoothed his chin,
And nodded that the bull-bait might begin."

BOOK III.

AND the font took Sordello's laurels. Let them lie.
Nature calls back her child, her

"Strict embrace,
Putting aside the past, shall soon efface
Its print as well—factitious humours grown
Over the true—loves, hatreds not his own.

. . . So the stain
O' the world forsakes Sordello, with its pain,
Its pleasure : . . . Mantua's familiar shapes
Die, fair and foul die, fading as they flit,
Men, women, and the pathos and the wit,
Wise speech and foolish, deeds to smile or sigh
For, good, bad, seemly or ignoble, die.
The last face glances through the eglantines,
The last voice murmurs 'twixt the blossomed vines
Of Men."

He gives up the idea of self-revelment to the world.

"Better sure be unrevealed," he says,
"Than part-revealed : Sordello well or ill
Is finished."

So he relapses to his old dreamy paradise, and gives up his efforts to please the world, as he had before given up his ambition to be Apollo. He will just be himself and take the delights that Nature brings—what is the use of anything else? So past

“A sweet and solitary year
Wasted.”

But the eyes once bright with enterprise, grew dim and satiate with simply receiving; besides, a dim, disturbing consciousness oppressed him—

“He slept, but was aware he slept,
So, frustrated.”

At last, one declining autumn day, he saunters home complacently, his mood and Nature's in accord. All his Mantua life trodden out—even the power of song a forgotten gift—as much a thing of the past as any other quality of the Apollo he once aimed to be,—his tongue has forgotten its trick, his brain its craft. Like Nature this autumn day, the promise of his year has fallen into “the sere and yellow leaf.” When, suddenly, breaking the grey quietness, comes a convulsion of Nature—

“’Twas the marsh
Gone of a sudden. Mincio, in its place,
Laughed, a broad water, in next morning's face.”

The catastrophe awakens the thought, are he and Nature bound by the same bars of fate?

“No! youth once gone is gone :
Deeds let escape are never to be done.

Leaf-fall and grass-spring for the year ; for us—
 Oh forfeit I unalterably thus
 | My chance ? nor two lives wait me, this to spend
 | Learning save that ?"

He feels that he is letting slip his life.

"Nature has time, may mend
 Mistake, she knows occasion will recur ;
 Landslip or sea-breach, how affects it her
 With her magnificent resources ?—I
 Must perish once and perish utterly."

p23 . No second chance that "Elys," his muse, whom he
 had wooed in the snow-month, though it was April
 ere she answered—and who has stood neglected all this

"Linden-flower-time-long,"

her eyes upon the ground, but who yet waits him
 though it is July now, and somewhat pale will still
 meet him in the moonlight by the village elm, still
 let him lift her

"Coarse flax veil
 And whisper (the damp little hand in yours)
 Of love, heart's love, your heart's love that endures
 Till death."

No more chance of mixing with the mad rout in
 Friedrich's wine-scented island-house ; no chance ever
 to go like Dandolo through vanquished Bezant,

"Worshipping hearts about him for a wall.

.
 No more lives, deaths, loves, hatreds, peaces, wars."

All indeed but

“Fragments of a whole ordained to be;”

only roundels of a ladder, though appearing

“The very platform it was reared

To lift him on.”

He has laid the ladder down. He climbs not.

“Still, aloft

The platform stretches.”

There *is* Happiness. He knows that he believes in it, by the very blind instinct that bade him forego these roundels of the ladder unless they led him to something beyond themselves; these partial blisses which he dared not entertain as they offered, and which now elude him, yet promise a something beyond themselves of which he now, for the first time, catches a glimpse. He concludes that Happiness must consist in the union of one's own being with what is external to it.

“The Alien turning Native to the soul
Or body.”

I am whole, yet for completion demand a Palma, he says. If the world were equally alien to my soul,

“’Twere Happiness to make it one with me;” but

“Nought is Alien in the world—my Will
Owns all already.”

Yet since my Means to correspond with Will fall so short of the Will itself,

"'Twas my bond

To tread the very joys that tantalise

Most now, into a grave, never to rise.

I die then! Will the rest agree to die?"

Next age shall some Sordello rise, who shall try

"Clue after clue, and catch at last the clue

I miss?"

which yet is under my finger all the while—perhaps
just in

"Some yearning traced

Deeper, some petty consequence embraced

Closer!"

Why did I flee Mantua complaining that my Will
was fettered, yet contenting myself with half the
range even of my tether? Why did I renounce the
part because I could not have the whole?

"'Able to exchange

My ignorance (I felt) for knowledge, and

Idle because I could thus understand:—

. . . Mantua's yoke.

My minstrel's-trade, was to behold mankind,—

My own concernment—just to bring my mind

Behold, just extricate, for my acquist,

Each object suffered stifle in the mist

Which hazard, use and blindness could impose

In their relation to myself.'

He rose.

The level wind carried above the firs

Clouds, the irrevocable travellers,

Onward."

His resolution is taken no longer to be "pushed into a drowsy copse," while outside the pageant, ne'er to be repeated, fleets by. It is the noontide of his life; better to wreak his will somehow, anyhow, on the world ere night come.

"Slake

This thirst somehow."

A blasted bud has yet more of the flower in it at least than the dormant bulb in the mummy's grasp.

Opportunely on this mood of his arrives Naddo, as a messenger from Palma, with news from the outer world, — telling how Ecelin has parted his wealth between his two sons and wedded them to Guelfs, while he himself retires to a convent, and Palma a week since plighted her troth to Count Richard of St Boniface, Prince of Verona, and now summons Sordello, doubtless to contrive the marriage-chant,

"Ere Richard storms Ferrara."

Sordello instantly closes with the chance which so falls in with his own mood, and at once sets out for Verona. Next day he arrives there, on the evening with which the Poem opens, when the town is astir with the news that Richard has fallen into Taurello's trap and is a prisoner in Ferrara.

"I' the palace, each by each,
Sordello sat and Palma : little speech
At first in that dim closet, face with face
(Despite the tumult in the market-place)
Exchanging quick low laughers ; . . .
But for the most part their two histories

Ran best thro' the locked fingers and linked arms.
And so the night flew on with its alarms
Till in burst one of Palma's retinue:
'Now, Lady!' gasped he. Then arose the two
And leaned into Verona's air, dead-still.
A balcony lay black beneath until
Out, 'mid a gush of torchfire, grey-haired men
Came on it and harangued the people; then
Sea-like that people surging to and fro
Shouted, 'Hale forth the carroch—trumpets, ho,
A flourish! . . . Hammer! that whom behoves
• May hear the League is up!"

So the people shout, harangued by the grey-haired
Senators,—ardent in the cause of their imprisoned
Count and the Guelfs.

"Enough. Now turn—
Over the eastern cypresses: discern!"

The air rings with shouts that overpower the clang

"Of the incessant carroch, even . . .
Ferrara's succoured, Palma!"

Once again Sordello and Palma are alone together,
and she tells him "with a coy fastidious grace" of another want besides his own which Goito's quiet had nourished—her own want to serve, as his to be served,—of some "Out-Soul" to whom to devote herself, for whose coming heart and mind had delayed their life, shrinking, till that orb should dawn, from giving play to any jetting power.

“ ‘Was I to have a chance touch spoil me, leave
My spirit thence unfitted to receive
The consummating spell ? ’ ”

How she had wearied in waiting, and at last

“ ‘That earnest April morn
Of Richard’s Love-court, . . .

Outburst

One face from all the faces.’ ”

Men’s acknowledgment sanctioned her own, and the long-sought was found in Sordello. Henceforth, while the Tuscan Adelaide “sat scheming, scheming,” and working her puppet Ecelin, Palma’s one object was to secure Sordello for herself and for Romano. But how do it? Even could she tread over the ruins of her father Ecelin and supplant his sons, there would still be Taurello and the insuperable Adelaide to reckon with. But at last

“ ‘One wild eve that lady died

In her lone chamber ; only I beside ; ’ ”

and among the uncouth treasures flung up from their sunless sleeps within her,

“ ‘Fragments of many miserable schemes,
Secrets, more secrets.’ ”

At last there came one secret out as she gathered up

“ ‘ Her face,

All left of it, into one arch grimace,
To die with . . .

Friend ’tis gone ! ’ ”

says Palma, recalling the horror of the death-scene,

" 'But not the fear
Of that fell laughing, heard as now I hear.
Nor faltered voice, nor seemed her heart grow weak
When i' the midst abrupt she ceased to speak
—Dead, as to serve a purpose, mark !—for in
Rushed o' the very instant Ecelin
(How summoned, who divines ?)—looking as if
He understood why Adelaide lay stiff
Already in my arms ;' "

He came resolved to undo everything Adelaide had done,
—why, Palma discovered afterwards when

" He stopped short in Vicenza, bent his head
Over a friar's neck,—' Had vowed,' he said,
' Long since, nigh thirty years, because his wife
And child were saved there, to bestow his life
On God, his gettings on the Church.' "

Destined by her father for Count Richard's bride
and

" Exiled
Within Goito, still one dream beguiled "

Palma's nights and days. She had found the Orb
she sought ; but how serve it ? How bring about that
Sordello and Romano should mingle destinies ? Then
Romano's angel stood beside her (who otherwise had
been Richard's bride), in the person of Taurello, bid-
ding her undo the ill Ecelin had done, refuse Guelf
Richard's hand, and make herself mistress of Romano



—and “my slender plodding talent, too.” So urged Taurello with his half-smile.

Meanwhile, Taurello apparently favours her alliance with Richard, till he gets him entrapped and made prisoner at Ferrara.

“ ‘And now,’ ” says Palma,
“ ‘What glory may engird Sordello’s brow
Through this? A month since at Oliero slunk
All that was Ecelin into a monk ;
But how could Salinguerra so forget
His liege of thirty years as grudge even yet
One effort to recover him? He sent
Forthwith the tidings of this last event
To Ecelin—declared that he, despite
The recent folly, recognised his right
To order Salinguerra.’ ”

Through Palma, Taurello’s letter had gone, and she holds her father’s answer.

“For him,” writes Ecelin, “no more concern
With strife than, for his children, with fresh plots
Of Friedrich. Old engagements out he blots
For aye : Taurello shall no more subserve,
Nor Ecelin impose.”

Palma proposes that lest this unnerve Taurello, she in her brothers’ default—who, having wedded Guelfs, had forsaken Romano—should herself stand Romano, and as the Kaiser’s representative give Taurello the licence he demands, and that she and Sordello should go together in disguise as arbiters to Ferrara, and there

"Let Taurello's noble accents teach
The rest! Then say if I have misconceived
Your destiny, too readily believed
The Kaiser's cause your own!'

And Palma fled.

Though no affirmative disturbs the head,
A dying lamp-flame sinks and rises o'er,
Like the alighted planet Pollux wore,
Until, morn breaking, he resolves to be
Gate-vein of this heart's blood of Lombardy,
Soul of this body—to wield this aggregate
Of souls and bodies, and so conquer fate
Though he should live—a centre of disgust
Even—apart, core of the outward crust
He vivifies, assimilates."

Thus one round of life is completed for Sordello.
He has found

"Not only that a soul, whate'er its might,
Is insufficient to its own delight,
Both in corporeal organs and in skill
By means of such to body forth its Will—
And, after, insufficient to apprise
Men of that Will, oblige them recognise
The Hid by the Revealed—but that, the last
Nor lightest of the struggles overpast,
His Will, bade abdicate, which would not void
The throne, might sit there, suffer be enjoyed
Mankind, a varied and divine array,"—

though incapable of rendering him homage or even an
incidental tribute of joys. If he has now ascertained

thus much of his proper service of mankind—that they should be themselves made act by him, whom they will not sit to see acting themselves,—if the true Poet's diadem,—to be the motive power which moves the mass of mankind, whether recognised by them or not—

“Seemed imminent while our Sordello drank
The wisdom of that golden Palma—thank
Verona's Lady in her Citadel. . . .
And truly when she left him, the sun reared
A head like the first clamberer's that peered
A-top the Capitol, his face on flame
With triumph—triumphing till Manlius came.”

Nor, says Browning to his readers, too much despise my rhymes that like fireworks soar awhile, then burst round the Queen in whose honour they were prosecuted, till

“Last a pause, a burst, and all
Her ivory limbs are smothered by a fall,
Bloom-finders and fruit-sparkles and leaf-dust,
Ending the weird work prosecuted just
For her amusement. . . .

Yet not so, surely never so!”

Then follows a long discursion in the Poem. Having completed one round of life for his hero, the poet puts his puppets to sleep for a while, and goes to disport himself with his own thoughts across the lagune at Venice, watching his own life, and discoursing about poets and poetry. In such songs as Eglamor's, he says, alone you find

"Completeness, judge the song and singer one,
And either purpose answered, his in it,
And its in him."

While in true works (such as Sordello's dream-performances that never will be more than dreamed), there is always some proof that the singer's proper life is beneath the life his song exhibits—

"This a sheath

To that ;"

his lay but an episode in his life, which far transcends it ;—some slight weariness, some start-away, some looking off from his song, says

" ' My life commenced before this work, . . .
My life continues after.' . . . Alas
For you ! who sigh, ' When shall it come to pass
We read that story ? How will he compress
The future gains, his life's true business,
Into the better lay which—that one flout,
Howe'er inopportune it be, lets out—
Engrosses him already, though professed
To meditate with us eternal rest,
And partnership in all his life has found ?'
'Tis but a sailor's promise, weather-bound ;"

who, becalmed, brings out the treasures of his late voyage and lays them on the bank for your admiration.

" ' Till . . . may that beetle (shake your cap) attest
The springing of a land-wind from the West !'

. . . Ah yes, you frolic it to-day !
 To-morrow and the pageant moved away
 Down to the poorest tent-pole, we and you
 Part company : no other may pursue
 Eastward your voyage, be informed what fate
 Intends, if triumph or decline await
 The tempter of the everlasting steppe."

So the poet muses on his ruined palace-step in Venice. Why break off or exhaust the fit England gave birth to ?

"Who's adorable
 Enough reclaim a —— no Sordello's Will,
 Alack !—be queen to me ?"

he asks—make him continue Sordello's story for her sake ? Give him the motive of an "Out-soul" for whom he can sing ? That Bassanese busied among her fruit-boats ?

"Her wreath
 Endures a month—a half month. . . .
 . . . Nay, that Paduan girl
 Splashes with barer legs where a live whirl
 In the dead black Giudecca proves sea-weed
 Drifting has sucked down three, four, all indeed
 Save one pale-red striped, pale-blue turbaned post
 For gondolas."

Ah ! but a sad dishevelled ghost, a suffering Humanity, plucks at him the while. Spare these merry girls, he says.

"Look they too happy, too tricked out ?"

Though there be confessedly such a niggard stock of happiness in the world that it will not with all our efforts make a sumpter-cloth which will stretch over mother and children both, still these having a little bit of it seems to give you a clearer claim for a like garb for the rest. All he asks for them is just youth and health and strength, discarding here in this magic weather of Venice much of old home requirement.

"That the whole race
Might add the spirit's to the body's grace."

"Venice seems" to him "a type
Of Life—'twixt blue and blue extends, a stripe,
As Life, the somewhat, hangs 'twixt nought and nought:
'Tis Venice, and 'tis Life—as good you sought
To spare me the Piazza's slippery stone,
Or keep me to the unchoked canals alone,
As hinder Life the evil with the good
That make up Living, rightly understood.
Only, do, finish something!"

To take the happy peasants and queens, parade them for the common credit, vouch that the luckless unhappy residue was just as much framed for happiness, and might have claimed it as well as they—such was his project, balked already!

"I hardly venture to adjust
The first rags, when you [a suffering Humanity] find
me. To mistrust

Me!—not unreasonably. . . .

Thin lips on tremble, lashless eyes
Inveterately tear-shot—there, be wise

Mistress of mine, there, there, as if I meant
You insult ! . . . Beside, care-bit, erased,
Broken-up beauties ever took my taste
Supremely ; and I love you more, far more
Than her I looked should foot Life's temple-floor.
Years ago, leagues at distance, when and where
A whisper came, ' Let others seek !—thy care
Is found, thy life's provision ; if thy race
Should be thy mistress, and into one face
The many faces crowd ? ' ”

Will she come to him, he asks, in his rough apparel
going careless and alone through Venice, this suffering
Humanity, this “ravishingest Lady,”

“ And, wistfully foregoing proper men,
Come timid up to me for alms ” ?

Nor is it to sneer he calls her ravishing, this sad
Humanity.

“ I regret

Little,” he says, “ that she, whose early foot was set
Forth as she'd place it on a pedestal,
Now, i' the silent city, seems to fall
Toward me—no wreath, only a lip's unrest
To quiet, surcharged eyelids to be pressed
Dry of their tears upon my bosom. . . .

Warped souls and bodies ! Yet God spoke
Of right-hand, foot and eye—selects our yoke,
Sordello, as your poetship may find !
So, sleep upon my shoulder, child, nor mind
Their foolish talk—we'll manage reinstate
Your old worth.”

Even when men prate of evil men past hope, does not yet each losel keep, through a maze of lies, his own conceit of truth? does not some fancied right allow his vilest wrong? Is not

" ' Evil, the scheme by which, through Ignorance,
Good labours to exist.' A slight advance"—certainly
" Merely to find the sickness you die through ; "

but better than to deepen ignorance by hinting about dispensing a water of life one hasn't got! Here we are but constructing an engine to work elsewhere.

" With a finished one,
What it can do, is all,—nought, how 'tis done.
But this of ours yet in probation, dusk
A kernel of strange wheelwork through its husk
Grows into shape by quarters and by halves ; . . .
We die : which means to say, the whole's removed,
Dismounted wheel by wheel, this complex gin,—
To be set up anew elsewhere, begin
A task indeed, but with a clearer clime
Than the murk lodgment of our building-time.
And then, I grant you, it behoves forget
How 'tis done—all that must amuse us yet
So long ; " only
" Pray that I be not busy slitting steel
Or shredding brass, camped on some virgin shore
Under a cluster of fresh stars, before
I name a tithe o' the wheels I trust to do ! "

Pray, that is, that we be not moved to another sphere where we shall have to use our engine before it is half made.

“Hitherto,
 At present, and a weary while to come,
 The office of ourselves,—nor blind nor dumb,
 And seeing somewhat of man’s state,—has been,
 For the worst of us, to say they so have seen ;
 For the better, what it was they saw ; the best
 Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.”

Then follows a specimen of the Poet’s mode of imparting this gift of seeing.

“There’s no face,” says such an one, “but I can read
 profound
 Disclosures in ; this stands for hope, that—fear.”

Then he takes an example of a poem in which an incarcerated youth begs his mistress to

“Stoop, else the strings of blossom, where the nuts
 O’erarch, will blind thee !”—

living over again with her in his imprisonment a day
 of nutting in the summer woods. Yes,

“‘That’s truth !’
 (Adjudge you) ‘the incarcerated youth
 Would say that !’”

So much you can judge of. Yes, but the poet sees more than that in the words. He sees the dim city surroundings amid which Plara, the bard who wrote it, spent his youth. Whence he

“Bade hail
 In twice twelve sonnets, Tempe’s dewy vale.”

He can describe it all to you. You compare it with the fact, and acknowledge

"Exact the town, the minster and the street!"

Then he takes an abstract example instead of a concrete to illustrate the Poet's "making see."

"As all mirth triumphs, sadness means defeat."

Yes, but the moods themselves are colourless; it is what causes them that determines their tinge, as of heaven or earth. True, you say, "that's the variation's gist." Well then, says the Poet, having gone with me so far,

"Thus far advanced in safety, then proceed!

And having seen what I too saw, be bold

And next encounter what I do behold

(That's sure) but bid you take on trust!"

But, after all, what is the use and purpose of such sights as Poets can make us see?

"Alack

Not so unwisely does the crowd dispense

On Salinguerras praise in preference

To the Sordellos: men of action, these!

Who, seeing just as little as you please,

Yet turn that little to account, . . . carry on, a stage,

The work o' the world, not merely make report

The work existed ere their day! In short,

When at some future no-time a brave band

Sees, using what it sees, then shake my hand

In heaven, my brother! Meanwhile where's the hurt

Of keeping the Makers-see on the alert,

At whose defection mortals stare aghast
As though heaven's bounteous windows were slammed
fast

Incontinent? Whereas all you, beneath,
Should scowl at, curse them, bruise lips, break their
teeth

Who ply the pulleys, for neglecting you :
And therefore have I moulded, made anew
A Man [Sordello], and give him to be turned and
tried,
Be angry with or pleased at."

Who by-and-by, when full-grown, like Hercules when
he was marched a sacrifice to Jove, will turn at the
altar and begin slaying his slayers,—and then what
chance have I? says Browning. Then turning to his
own audience, he says—

"Take not affront, my gentle audience! whom
No Hercules shall make his hecatomb,
Believe, nor from his brows your chaplet rend—
That's your kind suffrage, yours, my patron-friend."

(Mrs Orr explains that this patron-friend is
Walter Savage Landor.)

"My English Eyebright, if you are not glad
That, as I stopped my task awhile, the sad
Dishevelled form, wherein I put mankind
To come at times and keep my pact in mind,
Renewed me,—hear no crickets in the hedge,
Nor let a glow-worm spot the river's edge
At home, and may the summer showers gush
Without a warning from the missel-thrush!

So, to our business, now—the fate of such
As find our common nature—overmuch
Despised because restricted and unfit
To bear the burthen they impose on it—
Cling when they would discard it ; craving strength
To leap from the allotted world, at length
They do leap,—flounder on without a term,
Each a god's germ, doomed to remain a germ
In unexpanded infancy, unless . . .
But that's the story. . . .
Still, never misconceive my protraiture. . . .
What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint."

As the old story goes of St John the Belovèd, who,
banished from Antioch to Patmos, bidding his Antioch
flock farewell, mistook his own portrait for the Devil
domiciled over his son Xanthus' hearth !

" ' Ah, Xanthus, am I to thy roof beguiled
To see the—the—the Devil domiciled ? '
Whereto sobbed Xanthus, ' Father, 'tis yourself
Installed, a limning which our utmost pelf
Went to procure against to-morrow's loss ;
And that's no twy-prong, but a pastoral cross,
You're painted with ! '

His puckered brows unfold—
And you shall hear Sordello's story told."

BOOK IV.

OPENS with the rueful case of poor Ferrara.

“The lady-city, for whose sole embrace
Her pair of suitors struggled, . . . each party too
intent

For noticing, howe'er the battle went,
The conqueror would but have a corpse to kiss.
‘May Boniface be duly damned for this!’
—Howled some old Ghibellin, as up he turned,
From the wet heap of rubbish where they burned
His house, a little skull with dazzling teeth :
‘A boon, sweet Christ—let Salinguerra seethe
In hell for ever, Christ, and let myself
Be there to laugh at him!’—moaned some young Guelf
Stumbling upon a shrivelled hand nailed fast
To the charred lintel of the doorway, last
His father stood within to bid him speed.
The thoroughfares were overrun with weed
—Docks, quitchgrass, loathly mallows no man plants.
The stranger, none of its inhabitants
Crept out of doors to taste fresh air again,
And ask the purpose of a splendid train”

sweeping one morning through the desolated weed-grown streets. They are the envoys from every town of the East League come to treat for the ransom of Richard.

"At last, 'Taurello greets
The League,' announced a pursuivant—'will match
Its courtesies, and labours to despatch
At earliest Tito, Friedrich's Pretor, sent
On pressing business, . . . simply waits
Their going to receive the delegates."

The delegates exchange glances, and admire askance
the lazy warlike engines that line the streets,

"Couched like a king each on his bank of earth,"
against which bands of mercenaries lean watching
the strangers. "Get our friend away," they say to
each other,

"And profit for the future: how else teach
Fools 'tis not safe to stray within claw's reach
Ere Salinguerra's final gasp be blown? . . .

The carrochs halted in the public square. . . .
Men prattled, freelier that the crested gaunt
White ostrich with a horse-shoe in her beak
Was missing"—

of Ecelin and Adelaide and the Ghibellin atrocities,
lifting the covering Salinguerra had tried to stretch
upon the truth.

"Our dropping Autumn morning clears apace,
And poor Ferrara puts a softened face

On her misfortunes. • Let us scale this tall
 Huge four-square line of red brick garden-wall : ”
 and we find ourselves in the old pleasure-grounds,
 rich with exotic plants and rare marbles, which
 Salinguerra had planned in his youth,

“To emulate
 Sicilian marvels, that his girlish wife
 Retrude still might lead her ancient life
 In her new home ”

in his grim “San Pietro Palace.” In this same old
 palace it is that he has now imprisoned Boniface, and
 it is here that the envoys must come to sue for grace.

“And here, emerging from the labyrinth
 Below, Sordello paused beside the plinth
 Of the door-pillar.

He had really left
 Verona for the corn-fields, . . .

Where Este’s camp was made ;
 The Envoy’s march, the Legate’s cavalcade—
 All had been seen by him,”

but not now with the aloof onlooker’s eyes of his
 boyhood.

“A crowd,—he meant
 To task the whole of it ; each part’s intent
 Concerned him, therefore : and the more he pried,
 The less became Sordello satisfied
 With his own figure at the moment.”

Does he seek respite from his task ? Does

“This phalanx as of myriad points combined ”

which is to supply a body to his soul—this crowd,
make the mankind he once raved about?

"Because a few of them were notable,
Should all be figured worthy note? As well
Expect to find Taurello's triple line
Of trees a single and prodigious pine.
Real pines rose here and there; but, close among,
Thrust into and mixed up with pines, a throng
Of shrubs, he saw,—a nameless common sort
O'erpast in dreams. . . .
Reckon that morning's proper chiefs—how few!
And yet the people grew, the people grew,
Grew ever, as if the many there indeed,
More left behind and most that should succeed,—
Simply in virtue of their mouths and eyes
Petty enjoyments and huge miseries,—
Mingled with, and made veritably great
Those chiefs; . . . each dwindled to be head
Of infinite and absent Tyrolese
Or Paduans; startling all the more, that these
Seemed passive and disposed of, uncared for,
Yet doubtless on the whole (like Eglamor)
Smiling,"

the faint remainder of some worn-out smile

"Poor Misery from her store
Of looks is fain to upgather, keep unfurled
For common wear as she goes through the world.
. . . While
Crowd upon crowd rose on Sordello thus, . . .
The new body, ere he could suspect,

Cohered, mankind and he were really fused,
The new self seemed impatient to be used
By him, but utterly another way
Than that anticipated; strange to say
They were too much below him. . . .
What bootied scattered units?—here a mind
And there, which might repay his own to find,
And stamp, and use?—a few, howe'er august,
If all the rest were grovelling in the dust?"

He must establish a mighty equilibrium, procure the
privileges for all which the few had long possessed.

"He felt
An error, an exceeding error melt"—

while he had been occupied with Mantuan chants, he should have been thinking of men and taking their wants as his own want, and only after that think of rare qualities of his own soul demanding exercise. It followed naturally that he felt himself now past retrieve in the toils of the multitude, and could not cease to wonder, that in his eagerness to rule, he had never thought that this rule of his might be fraught also with incidental good to those ruled, and so mankind's delight made help to swell his own enjoyment. Fortunately he has seen his fault in time, however, and since the prime office includes the secondary, he will accept both. Taurello shall teach him the preparatory one, how to do what he had fancied done long since, ere he undertakes the greater task.

"How render first these people happy? Ask
The people's friends—for there must be one good,
One way to it—the Cause!"

That must have been what Palma meant, and all this
strife of Guelfs and Ghibellins must just be

"Which of the two Powers shall bring
Men good—perchance the most good—ay, it may
Be that!—the question, which best knows the way.

And hereupon Count Mainard strutted past
Out of San Pietro ; never seemed the last
Of archers, slingers ; and our friend began
To recollect strange modes of serving man—
Arbalist, catapult, brake, mangonel,
And more, 'This way of theirs may,—who can tell?—
Need perfecting,' said he . . . 'Taurello 'tis, the
task devolved

On late—confront Taurello.'

And at last

He did confront him. Scarcely an hour past
When forth Sordello came, older by years
Than at his entry. Unexampled fears
Oppressed him, and he staggered off, blind, mute
And deaf, like some fresh-mutilated brute,
Into Ferrara ;"

not the empty town now it was this morning ; the veil
has been stripped from its desolated streets, and its
miserable folk crawl forth, and he is brought face to
face with all its human misery. A woman gives him
the choice of her two daughters for half a chain his
throat is clasped with ; but an archer, who knows his

coat with its blue cross and eight lilies, bids him beware of one dogging him in concert with the pair thrumming on the sleeve that hid his knife.

“Night set in early, autumn dewes were rife,
They kindled great fires while the Leaguer’s mass
Began at every carroch—he must pass
Between the kneeling people. Presently
The carroch of Verona caught his eye
With purple trappings ;”

and he bent over its fire, when violent voices began, and a man calls to him—

“Here, minstrel, drive bad thoughts away ; sing !”

and for that man’s sake he turned and proposed to sing a song of Eglamor’s. No, “‘Our Sordello’s rather,’ all exclaimed.” He would have been happy to deny this time, yet at the close he could not help saying, “I made that” to a youth who rose as if to hear. The youth turns out to be Palma, who leads him silently through the crowd and back to Taurello, who turns from audiences with spokesmen of Kaiser and Pope to listen to this new

“Incarnation of the People’s hope,
Sordello.”

Taurello interviews the pair in a drear vast presence-chamber, in which the Kaiser’s twy-necked eagle holds the place of honour.

“Nor lacked
Romano’s green and yellow either side.

.

If Palma knew

What Salinguerra almost meant to do
Until the sight of her restored his lip
A certain half-smile, three months' chieftainship
Had banished."

What is Taurello thinking of, as, their visit over, he sits carelessly winding and unwinding that new badge Tito has brought him? He is thinking that this minstrel is Romano's last servant, as he her first. What a contrast between the two and their past!

"The minstrel's thirty years just spent

In doing nothing, . . .

Who yet was lean, outworn, and really old,
A stammering awkward man that scarce dared raise
His eye before the magisterial gaze—

And Salinguerra with his fears and hopes

Of sixty years, his Emperors and Popes,

Cares and contrivances, yet, you would say,

'Twas a youth nonchalantly looked away

Through the embrasure northward o'er the sick

Expostulating trees—so agile, quick

And graceful turned the head on the broad chest

Encased in pliant steel; . . . and loosened of its

tire

Of steel, that head let breathe the comely brown

Large massive locks discoloured as if a crown

Encircled them, so frayed the basnet where

A sharp white line divided clean the hair;

Glossy above, glossy below, it swept

Curling and fine about a brow thus kept

Calm. . . . Square-faced,
No lion more ; two vivid eyes, enchased
In hollows filled with many a shade and streak
Settling from the bold nose and bearded cheek.
Nor might the half-smile reach them that deformed
A lip supremely perfect else. . . . The Kaiser's symbol
 lay
Beside his rescript, a new badge by way
Of baldric ; while,—another thing that marred
Alike emprise, achievement and reward,—
Ecelin's missive was conspicuous too."

His thoughts run over his past life as he sits there. Few names half as old as his in Mantua ; but in Ferrara, where his sires had enrolled it latterly, they had rivals in the Adelardi family, and in order that the wealth and sway might be concentrated in one house, it had been arranged in his youth that he, the young Taurello, should wed Linguetta, the heiress of the Adelardi. A stealthy treaty to this effect had already been made between the families, when suddenly the Ravennese Guelfs arrived and carried off his promised bride. His townsfolk outwardly condoled with Taurello, talked of making him amends, gave him a goshawk, and told him there was rare sport a mile or two out of town. When he returns he finds the Guelf Azzo entering Ferrara with Linguetta as his bride ! Taurello goes off to Sicily, marries a bride of Heinrich's blood, and just as Azzo is beginning to forget how he had crept into his downy nest at Ferrara, Taurello reappears at Mantua "sword on

thigh and tuft on chin," and proceeds to lay out gardens round his old palace in Ferrara for his bride; and while this is going on goes to visit his friend Ecelin at Vicenza. What can his object be, but to restore the Ghibellin head of Ferrara with the Kaiser's help? thinks Azzo. So the Guelf Azzo, with the help of Boniface, expels both Ecelin and Taurello from Vicenza; but the Guelfs shout their triumph too soon. Ecelin, in his passion of revenge, sets fire to part of the town, Taurello's wife and child perishing in the flames. Taurello—

"Bore the blow, retained his hold,
Got friends safe through, left enemies the worst
O' the fray, and hardly seemed to care at first—
But afterward men heard not constantly
Of Salinguerra's House so sure to be!"

Azzo, however, only gained a shifting of his plagues, for Romano became wife and child to Taurello, and for Romano's sake he seemed reconciled to losing his individual life. Soon Taurello and Adelaide

"The subtle mate
Of the weak soldier Ecelin,"

overbore the rest of Lombardy. But why, asks Heinrich, does Taurello screen himself behind Romano? Nor did Philip acquiesce willingly—he

"Reasoned, plied
His friend with offers of another bride,
A statelier function—fruitlessly: 'twas plain
Taurello through some weakness must remain
Obscure."

The spring of his personal life is broken, his heart lies in the grave of his wife and child.

None the less his outer life goes on carelessly, successfully. You hardly could surprise the man who shamed Sordello in this as in much beside, that, with no ideal of graces, he yet took them on singularly well as the occasion arose, and became master of many ;—displaying himself just so much as it was needful to do so in order to read men's hearts and catch their capabilities and purposes.

“ While our Sordello only cared to know
About men as a means whereby he'd show
Himself, and men had much or little worth
According as they kept in or drew forth
That self.”

On the contrary, Taurello's

“ Choicest instruments
Surmised him shallow.”

Meanwhile malcontents against the Ghibellins dropped off.

“ ‘ How
Change the world's face ? ’ asked people : ‘ as 'tis now
It has been, will be ever ; very fine,
Subjecting things profane to things divine.
In talk. . . .
The Ghibellins gain on us ! ’ ”

But

“ Then, either Ecelin grew old,
Or his brain altered.”

Now he would make some mad onslaught on Este, now cringe for peace at cost of past gains; so Romano and the Ghibellins sank, and the Guelfs and Este rose. People prayed Ecelin to use Taurello's wits again—not he!—and only Adelaide's remaining staunch prevented Romano's utter destruction.

"But when she died, doom fell, for gay
He [Ecelin] made alliances, gave lands away
To whom it pleased accept them, and withdrew
For ever from the world. Taurello, who
Was summoned to the convent, then refused
A word at the wicket, patience thus abused,
Promptly threw off alike his imbecile
Ally's yoke, and his own frank, foolish smile."

Soon a few moves of his changed matters, and Este and the Guelfs lay prone again.

"And men remembered, somewhat late,
A laughing old outrageous stifled hate
He bore to Este—how it would outbreak
At times spite of disguise, like an earthquake
In sunny weather.

He

'Twas, leaned in the embrasure absently,
Amused with his own efforts, now, to trace
With his steel-sheathed forefinger, Friedrich's face
I' the dust."

His mind goes out over that long-past night in Vicenza, when he and Ecelin,—the monk now,—fought to-

gether ; and he wonders, " Will no vein throb there ? "
 as Ecelin sits now,

" Slaving and mute,
Intent on chafing each starved purple foot
Benumbed past aching with the altar slab—
. . . When some monk shall blab
Spitefully to the circle of bald scalps,
' Friedrich's affirmed to be our side the Alps ? ' "

Ay, though he

" Enfold the scanty grey serge scapular
Twice o'er the cowl to muffle memories out ? "

—the surging flame of the fired city—the block in the
gates—the blood frying and hissing on his brass
gloves,

" As they tear
Those upturned faces choking with despair, "

while he forces his way through the reeking gate in
search of wife and child. Then

" " One shriek
(I hear it) as you fling—you cannot speak—
Your gold-flowered basnet to a man who haled
The Adelaide he dared scarce view unveiled
That morn, naked across the fire : how crown
The archer that exhausted lays you down
Your infant, smiling at the flame, and dies ?
While one, while mine . . .

Bacchus ! I think there lies
More than one corpse there ' (and he paced the room)
—' Another cinder somewhere—'twas my doom
Beside, my doom ! ' "

But if Adelaide is dead, I live, he thinks, and this Azzo lives in the place of that one, and we'll pull Este into a heap at last! But Ecelin recoils just when the best days begin! What does it matter, if he will but leave Taurello his name to fight with? But he must interfere from his cloister—become a stumbling-block as of old. Yet the old loyalty will not let Taurello take the place of him whom he recognises still as the "Land's inevitable Head!"—How explain these reverences that subject us?—What is there in these Ecelins? but—

"Why, men must twine

Somehow with something! Ecelin's a fine
Clear name."

But now the Emperor's badge has made Taurello himself Romano. At last—

"I am absolved [he says]

From further toil: the empery devolved
On me, 'twas Tito's word: I have to lay
For once my plan, pursue my plan my way,
Prompt nobody, and render an account
Taurello to Taurello."

—If I will, but is it worth while?—

"For I, this idle strap to wear,
Shall—fret myself abundantly, what end
To serve? There's left me twenty years to spend
—How better than my old way? . . .

The world's tide
Rolls,—and what hope of parting from the press
Of waves, a single wave through weariness

Gently lifted aside, laid upon shore?
 My life must be lived out in foam and roar,
 No question. Fifty years the province held
 Taurello; troubles raised, and troubles quelled,
 He in the midst—who leaves this quaint stone place,
 These trees a year or two, then not a trace
 Of him! How obtain hold, fetter men's tongues
 Like this poor minstrel with his foolish songs—
 To which, despite our bustle, he is linked?
 —Flowers one may tease, that never grow extinct.
 Ay, that patch, surely, green as ever, where
 I set Her Moorish lentisk, by the stair,
 To overawe the aloes; and we trod
 Those flowers, how call you such?—into the sod;
 A stately foreigner—a world of pain
 To make it thrive, arrest rough winds—all vain!
 It would decline; these would not be destroyed:
 And now where is it? where can you avoid
 The flowers? . . .

Fate, fate, fate,
 My fine Taurello! Go you, promulgate
 Friedrich's decree;”

and let your Prefect's badge aggrandise young Ecelin.

“ ‘How now? Compete
 With my old comrade? shuffle from their seat
 His children? Paltry dealing! . . .
 . . . Here's Taurello hankering
 After a boy's preferment—this plaything
 To carry, Bacchus!’ and he laughed.”

But

"Thoughts were caprices in the course of deeds
Methodic with Taurello ;"

so he turns from them to his own immediate doubt whether he can satisfy the League without conceding Richard to them. Midnight comes over the harassed city, and beside the blackest of the mouldering watch-fires Sordello speaks and Palma replies, with none to listen. "'Tis your cause ;" he says, but

"What makes a Ghibellin ? There should be laws—

. . . Assure me, good may lurk
Under the bad,—my multitude has part
In your designs, their welfare is at heart
With Salinguerra. . . . So divest
Our conference of much that scared me. Why
Affect that heartless tone to Tito ? I
Esteemed myself, yes, in my inmost mind,
This morn, a recreant to my race—mankind
O'erlooked till now ; . . .

. . . But I front Taurello, one
Of happier fate, and all I should have done
He does ; the people's good being paramount
With him, their progress may perhaps account
For his abiding still ;"—

but you heard the way he talked of burning those
five hostages ?

"All to your profit—nought
Meantime of these, of conquests to achieve
For them, of wretchedness he might relieve
While profiting your party. . . .

. . . Do Guelfs pursue
Their ends by means like yours, or better?"

But the Guelfs proved no better than the Ghibel-
lins.

Morn broke, and once more Sordello met its gaze
proudly,—the people's charge against him fails at every
point.

"‘I have done nothing,’" he says, "‘but both sides
do worse

Than nothing. Nay, to me, forgotten, reft
Of insight, lapped by trees and flowers, was left
The notion of a service—ha? What lured
Me here, what mighty aim was I assured
Must move Taurello? What if there remained
A Cause, intact, distinct from these, ordained
For me, its true discoverer?"

Here a watcher pressed in before them to suggest a
subject for a ballad. Surely they must know the tale
of the old Consul of Rome, dead long ago,—

"‘Not know Crescentius Nomentanus?"

When Sordello says he does not, the watcher tells
how, when a novice was introduced to the Brown-
sleeve Brotherhood to which he had belonged, they
always related the tale of Crescentius before Nocturns,
both in order to keep alive his fame and as tending to
produce like great acts to his. Crescentius who, amid
a degenerate Rome,

"‘Stood erect, and from his brain
Gave Rome out on its ancient plan again,

. . . Brutus' Rome, Kings styled
Themselves mere citizens of. . .
He flashes like a phanal, all men catch
The flame, Rome's just accomplished,'"

when Otto returned, and

" ' They crucified
Their Consul in the Forum ; and abide
Ere since such slaves at Rome, that I—(for I
Was once a brown-sleeved brother, merrily
Appointed)—I had option to keep wife
Or keep brown sleeves, and managed in the strife
Lose both. A song of Rome ! ' "

The idea of Rome, the Mother-City, struck Sordello's
ignorance. "Rome's the Cause." How could he
doubt it ?

"Rome typifies the scheme to put mankind
Once more in full possession of her rights.
'Let us have Rome again ! On me it lights
To build up Rome—on me, the first and last:
For such a future was endured the past !'
And thus, in the grey twilight, forth he sprung
To give his thoughts consistency among
The very People—let their facts avail
Finish the dream grown from the archer's tale."

BOOK V.

"Is it the same Sordello in the dusk
As at the dawn?"

What has chilled the proud conception of a re-
habilitated Rome so soon? Sordello has been out
among Ferrara's squalid sons all day, and finds his
dream of Rome dropping away "arch by arch." Are
these

"The shining ones
Meet for the Shining City?"

Is it

"Leave to lead the brawls
Here i' the atria"

he wants?

"What his dues
Who puts the lustral vase to such an use?
Oh, huddle up the day's disasters!"

Utterly discouraged, evening finds him

"A perished husk
Now, that arose a power fit to build
Up Rome again."

He wanted to do in a day the work of ages ; but
 "Rome was not built in a day." Step by step, from
 rudest beginnings, when all that men asked was mere
 shelter, each generation adding its little step through
 the long ages, that was how material Rome arose,—
 one step at a time, one workman to each step.

"No leaping o'er the petty to the prime,

.
 ' Better ' (say you) ' merge
 At once all workmen in the demiurge,
 All epochs in a lifetime, every task
 In one.' So should the sudden city bask
 I' the day ;"—

but what of those who should feast there ? would they
 be fit for the Shining City ?

" ' Enough of Rome ! ' " thinks Sordello. " ' 'Twas
 happy to conceive

Rome on a sudden, nor shall fate bereave
 Me of that credit : for the rest, her spite
 Is an old story—serves my folly right
 In adding yet another to the dull
 List of abortions—things proved beautiful
 ; Could they be done, Sordello cannot do.' "

So he muses as he sits on the terrace idly plucking
 and throwing the powdery aloe-cusps away. While
 in his imagination he sees

" Shift

Rome's walls, and drop arch after arch, and drift
 Mist-like afar those pillars of all stripe,
 Mounds of all majesty. ' Thou archetype,



Last of my dreams and loveliest, depart!" he says.

"And then a low voice wound into his heart:

'Sordello!' (low as some old Pythoness

Conceding to a Lydian King's distress

The cause of his long error—one mistake

Of her past oracle) 'Sordello, wake!

God has conceded two sights to a man—

One, of men's whole work, Time's completed plan,

The other, of the minute's work, man's first

Step to the plan's completeness.'"

Why say all is vanity? What is dispersed except the hope of realising the Whole, of which you are only allowed a glimpse to encourage you to take your own step towards it?

"Why count as one

The first step, with the last step? What is gone

Except Rome's æry magnificence,

That last step you'd take first?—an evidence

You were God: be man now! Let those glances fall!

The basis, the beginning step of all,

Which proves you just a man—is that gone too?"

Sad to disconcert you further, but the full extent of Fate's ill-nature eludes even you, Sordello.

"The veil rent,

Read the black writing—the collective man

Outstrips the individual!"

Even in your own art

"Search your fill;

You get no whole and perfect Poet."

Each sums up in himself all who preceded him,—will, in his turn, be summed up in those who follow. The last of a series of workmen names the whole and becomes its crown and representative.

"Dissect

Every ideal workman.

Were you the first who brought—(in modern speech)
The Multitude to be materialised?
That loose eternal unrest—who devised
An apparition i' the midst?" (a soul to that body).

"The rout

Was checked, a breathless ring was formed about
That sudden flower. . . . Reign thy reign
And serve thy frolic service, Charlemagne!
—The very child of over-joyousness,
Unfeeling thence, strong therefore: Strength by
stress
Of Strength"—

of that he is the representative.

"He wills, how should he doubt then? Ages slip—
Was it Sordello pried into the work
So far accomplished, and discovered lurk
A company amid the other clans,
Only distinct in priests for castellans
And popes for suzerains? . . .
And dared create, out of that sect, a soul
Should turn a multitude, already whole,
Into its body? . . . Is't so sure
God's Church lives by a King's investiture?"

Look to last step ! A staggering—a shock—
 What's mere sand is demolished, while the rock
 Endures, . . . that help was prematurely thrust
 Aside, perchance !—but the air clears, nought's
 erased

Of the true outline ! Thus much being firm based,
 The other was a scaffold. See him stand
 Buttressed upon his mattock, Hildebrand
 Of the huge brain-mask welded ply o'er ply
 As in a forge ; . . .
 Call him no flower—a mandrake of the earth,
 Thwarted and dwarfed and blasted in its birth,
 Rather,—a fruit of suffering's excess,
 Thence feeling, therefore stronger ; still by stress
 Of Strength, work Knowledge !”

Of that he is the representative—Knowledge enforced by Strength ; but

“ Full three hundred years
 Have men to wear away in smiles and tears
 Between the two that nearly seemed to touch,
 Observe you.”


Many unknown workmen make up the chain
 between.

“ Alack
 For one thrust forward, fifty such fall back ! . . .
 . . . Hark !—from the hermit Peter's cry
 At Claremont, down to the first serf that says
 Friedrich's no liege of his while he delays
 Getting the Pope's curse off him ! The Crusade—
 Or trick of breeding Strength by other aid

Than Strength, is safe. Hark—from the wild
harangue

Of Vimmercato, to the carroch's clang
Yonder! The League—or trick of turning Strength
Against Pernicious Strength, is safe at length.
Yet hark—from Mantuan Albert making cease
The fierce ones, to Saint Francis preaching peace
Yonder! God's Truce—or trick to supersede
The very Use of Strength, is safe. Indeed
We trench upon the future. Who is found
To take next step, next age—trail o'er the ground—
Shall I say gourd-like?—not the flower's display
Nor the root's prowess, but the plenteous way
O' the plant—produced by joy and sorrow, whence
Unfeeling and yet feeling, strongest thence?
Knowledge by stress of merely Knowledge? No—
E'en were Sordello ready to forego
His life for this, 'twere overleaping work
Some one has first to do, howe'er it irk,
Nor stray a foot's breadth from the beaten road.
Who means to help must still support the load
Hildebrand lifted. . . . Much done—and yet
Doubtless that grandest task God ever set
On man, much left to do: . . . Engage
A gang about your work, for the next age
Or two, of Knowledge, part by Strength and part
By Knowledge! Then, indeed, perchance may start
Sordello on his race. . . . The scaffold in its turn
Becomes, its service o'er, a thing to spurn."

But the time is not yet.



“ Meanwhile, if your half-dozen years of life
 In store, dispose you to forego the strife,
 Who takes exception? Only, bear in mind
 Ferrara’s reached, Goito’s left behind.”

The time is past for you, Sordello, when you could
 be content simply to dream of doing things without
 doing them,—all that vanished the moment you de-
 scribed

“ Mankind as half yourself,—then fancy’s trade
 Ends once and always : how may half evade
 The other half ? ”

Out of a thousand helps to mankind just one or
 two can be accomplished presently ; but flinch from
 these, and see if, while one half of you lolls aloof in
 the vines completing Rome to the tip-top in fancy,
 your other half, Suffering Humanity,

“ Will stop

A tear, begin a smile ! ”

And

“ What if, now the scene
 Draws to a close, yourself have really been
 . . . He [to whom] Fate wafts,
 This very age, her whole inheritance
 Of opportunities ? . . . Since talking is your trade,
 There’s Salinguerra left you to persuade :
 Fail ! then ! ”—

So speaks the still small voice in Sordello’s heart.

“ ‘ No—no—which latest chance secure ! ’
 Leaped up and cried Sordello ! ‘ This made sure,

The past were yet redeemable ; its work
 Was—help the Guelfs, whom I, howe'er it irk,
 Thus help !' He shook the foolish aloë-haulm
 Out of his doublet, paused, proceeded calm
 To the appointed presence."

He finds Taurello talking with Palma about himself.

"The hesitating sunset floated back,
 Rosily traversed in the wonted track
 The chamber, from the lattice o'er the girth
 Of pines, to the huge eagle blacked in earth
 Opposite,—outlined sudden, spur to crest,
 That solid Salinguerra, and caressed
 Palma's contour ; 'twas day looped back night's pall :
 Sordello had a chance left spite of all."

But

"Much he made of the convincing speech,
 Meant to compensate for the past,—
 . . . The great argument to bind
 Taurello with the Guelf Cause, body and mind !"

Even when arguing for it, he is thinking mainly

"Was't not a touching incident—so prompt
 A rendering the world its just accopt,
 Once proved its debtor ? . . .
 . . . That he, Goito's god of yore,
 At duty's instance could demean himself
 So memorably, dwindle to a Guelf ?"

While audibly

“He discreetly urged
The need of Lombardy becoming purged
At soonest of her barons!”

Good-humoured Salinguerra

“Left playing with the rescript’s white wax seal
To scrutinise Sordello head and heel.”

And all he says at the end of his harangue is—

“‘What, it comes to pass
That poesy, sooner than politics,
Makes fade young hair?’—To think such speech
could fix
Taurello!”

Then with a flash of bitter truth it comes on Sordello
that his chance is already gone. So fantasies have
frittered his youth away that he has lost all earnest-
ness;—

“Lost will to work, lost power to even express
The need of working!”

The ignominious years stretch before him in which he
must idle his life out—

“‘Rather tear men out the heart
O’ the truth!’—Sordello muttered, and renewed
His propositions for the Multitude.

—‘Assist the Pope,’”

echoes Salinguerra, laughingly almost,

“‘Extend the Guelf dominion, fill the scope

O' the church, thus based on All, by All, for All—
Change Secular for Evangelical. . . .

Who'll subscribe

To a trite censure of the minstrel tribe
Henceforth?"

As

" 'When Constance, for his couplets, would promote
Alcamo from a parti-coloured coat,
To holding her lord's stirrup in the wars!'"

laughs Taurello. His scorn rouses the best of Sordello.

"Scorn the Poet? They, for once,
Asking 'what was,' obtained a full response."

He quite forgot himself even in his amazement that

"The rhyme

Disguised the royalty so much: he there—
And Salinguerra yet all unaware
Who was the lord, who liegeman!"

He claims the Poet's sovereignty, although confessing
with shame his own failure, in that he had forsaken
his function, and that thus, owing to his own slackness,
Salinguerra is fitter to help the world than he,

" 'Ordained its champion from eternity'—

that is much—

" 'But to behold thee scorn the post
I quit in thy behalf—to hear thee boast
What makes my own despair!' And while he rung
The changes on this theme, the roof up-sprung,

The sad walls of the presence-chamber died
 Into the distance. . . .
 And crowds of faces . . . deep clustered round
 Sordello, with good wishes no mere breath,
 Kind prayers for him no vapour, since, come
 death,
 Come life, he was fresh-sinewed every joint,
 Each bone new-marrowed as whom gods anoint
 Though mortal to their rescue. . . .
 'So was I' (closed he his inculcating,
 A poet must be earth's essential king)
 'So was I, royal so, and if I fail,
 'Tis not the royalty, ye witness quail,
 But one deposed who, caring not exert
 Its proper essence, trifled malapert
 With accidents instead—good things assigned
 As heralds of a better thing behind,'—

a poet must not be a mere copier, but a protoplast of
 nature—assimilating the old, and so bringing forth the
 new.

“ ‘Already you include
 The multitude ; then let the multitude
 Include yourself ; and the result were new :
 Themselves before, the multitude turn you.
 This were to live and move and have, in them,
 Your being, and secure a diadem
 You should transmit,’ ” when “ ‘you shall have in
 turn obeyed
 Some orb still prouder, . . .
 And some new king depose the old. . . .

Thought is the Soul of Act'—Song's task is to
produce "Acts by Thoughts only: . . . divest

Mind of e'en Thought, and, lo, God's unexpressed
Will dawns above us. All then is to win
Save that. How much for me, then? where begin
My work? About me, faces! and they flock,
The earnest faces. What shall I unlock
By song? behold me prompt, whate'er it be,
To minister.'"

The present work resolves itself into bowing Taurello
to the Guelf cause, and for this he is willing to die—

"If death might win compliance—sure, this strife
Is right for once—the People my support.'

. . . Palma's lighted eyes
Turned to Taurello, who, long past surprise,
Began, 'You love him—what you'd say at large
Let me say briefly.'"

Is it worth my while to be Romano?

"An obscure place
Suits me—there wants a youth to bustle, stalk
And attitudinise. . . . I am but
The liegeman—you are born the lieges, . . . resume
your kin
In your sweet self.'"—

You and your pale friend here be Romano;—and
half sportively he throws the Emperor's badge round
Sordello's neck:—

“ ‘This badge alone
 Makes you Romano’s Head—becomes superb
 On your bare neck, which would, on mine, disturb
 The pauldron,’ said Taurello. A mad act,
 Nor even dreamed about before.— . . .

‘For you there’s Palma to espouse—
 For me, one crowning trouble ere I house
 Like my compeer.’

On which ensued a strange
 And solemn visitation ; there came change
 O’er every one of them ; each looked on each :
 Up in the midst a truth grew, without speech.
 And when the giddiness sank and the haze
 Subsided, they were sitting, no amaze,
 Sordello with his baldric on, his sire
 Silent, though his proportions seemed aspire
 Momently ; and, interpreting the thrill
 Night at its ebb, Palma was found there still
 Relating somewhat Adelaide confessed
 A year ago, while dying on her breast,—
 Of a contrivance that Vicenza night,
 When Ecelin had birth.”

How Taurello’s young wife lay wounded in the
 flaming city—

“Retrude, the frail mother, on her face,
 None of her wasted, just in one embrace
 Covering her child :”—

how as they were lifting her Taurello’s mighty cry
 outbroke cheering his Mantuans, and drowning his

colleague Ecelin's clamour, and Adelaide recognised which of them was

"The natural chief, the man of men."

Her own child was born, but Salinguerra's child seemed to her to bear away the wreath from her own;—she, who had never before known a rival,—and mad with jealousy, she ordered the dying Retrude and her babe to be borne away to an obscure retreat.

"'Retrude's self not slain'

(Nor even here Taurello moved) 'though pain
Was fled. . . .

They marched: no sign once shook
The company's close litter of crossed spears,
Till, as they reached Goito, a few tears
Slipped in the sunset from her long black lash,
And she was gone. . . .

They laid Retrude in the font,
Taurello's very gift, her child was wont
To sit beneath. . . .

For Palma she would blend
With this magnific spirit to the end,
That ruled her first."

Adelaide had made her vow not to disclose that Taurello's infant lived; she had been told of his cold, calm acquiescence in his lot—

"'But free

To impart the secret to Romano, she
Engaged to repossess Sordello of

His heritage, and hers, . . . while now,
Was not Romano's sign-mark on that brow ?'

Across Taurello's heart his arms were locked :
And when he did speak 'twas as if he mocked
The minstrel, 'who had not to move,' he said,
'Nor stir—should Fate defraud him of a shred
Of his son's infancy ? much less of his youth !'
(Laughingly all this)—'which to aid, in truth,
Himself, reserved on purpose, had not grown
Old, not too old—'twas best they kept alone
Till now, and never idly met till now.'
. . . 'Embrace him, madman !' Palma cried,
Who through the laugh saw sweat-drops burst apace,
And his lips' blanching : he did not embrace
Sordello, but he laid Sordello's hand
On his own eyes, mouth, forehead.

Understand,

This while Sordello was becoming flushed
Out of his whiteness ; thoughts rushed, fancies rushed ;
He pressed his hand upon his head and signed
Both should forbear him. 'Nay, the best's behind !'
Taurello laughed—not quite with the same laugh :"

then he begins to talk wildly of how he should beat
the Guelfs, and carve out a kingdom, not now for Fried-
rich or Ecelin, but for himself—that is, for his son.

" 'I tell you, towards some such design

Have I worked blindly, yes, and idly, yes,
And for another, yes—but worked no less
With instinct at my heart'"—

really for his son, though he knew it not.

At last Palma interposes in the midst of his schemes,
takes his heavy mailed arms off

"Sordello's shrinking shoulders, and, that done,
Made him avert his visage, and relieve
Sordello (you might see his corselet heave
The while) who, loose, rose—tried to speak, then sank :
They left him in the chamber. All was blank.

And even reeling down the narrow stair
Taurello kept up, as though unaware
Palma was by to guide him, the old device
—Something of Milan—'how we muster thrice
The Torriani's strength there,' . . . thus the song
Continued even while she bade him stoop,
Thrid somehow, by some glimpse of arrow-loop,
The turnings to the gallery below,
Where he stopped short as Palma let him go.
When he had sat in silence long enough
Splintering the stone bench, braving a rebuff
She stopped the truncheon ; only to commence
One of Sordello's poems, a pretence
For speaking, some poor rhyme of 'Elys' hair
And head that's sharp and perfect like a pear,' "

from the old Goito performance ;

"And that at end, conceiving from the brow
And open mouth no silence would serve now,
Went on to say the whole world loved that man
And, for that matter, thought his face, though wan,
Eclipsed the Count's—he sucking in each phrase
As if an angel spoke. The foolish praise

Ended, he drew her on his mailed knees, made
 Her face a framework with his hands, a shade,
 A crown, aureole ; . . .
 To get the best look at, in fittest niche
 Dispose his saint. That done he kissed her brow,
 —‘Lauded her father for his treason now.’”

Would tell her all his schemes,—was she not at once

“‘Romano and his lady? so might claim
 To know all, as she should, . . . not one
 Fit to be told that foolish boy,’ he said,
 ‘But only let Sordello Palma wed,
 —Then!’”—

Taurello marches up and down the long dim passage,
 with its one grating showing the fiery West:—

“Hands clenched, head erect,
 Pursuing his discourse ; a grand unchecked
 Monotony made out from his quick talk
 And the recurring noises of his walk.

.
 And by the snatches you might ascertain
 That, Friedrich’s Prefecture surmounted, left
 By this alone in Italy,”

they

“Were free to break up Hildebrand,
 Rebuild, he and Sordello, Charlemagne—
 But garnished, Strength with Knowledge, ‘if we deign
 Accept that compromise and stoop to give
 Rome law, the Cæsar’s Representative.’

.

. . . Never ask
 Of Palma more! She sat, knowing her task
 Was done, the labour of it (for, success,
 Concerned not Palma, passion's votaress)
 Triumph at height, and thus Sordello crowned—
 Above the passage suddenly a sound
 Stops speech, stops walk: back shrinks Taurello, bids
 With large involuntary asking lids,
 Palma interpret. 'Tis his own foot-stamp—
 Your hand! His summons! Nay, this idle damp
 Befits not!" she says, and "Out they two reeled dizzily.
 'Visconti's strong in Milan,' resumed he,
 In the old, somewhat insignificant way—
 (Was Palma wont, years afterward, to say)
 As though the spirit's flight, sustained thus far,
 Dropped at that very instant. Gone they are—
 Palma, Taurello; Eglamor anon,
 Ecelin,—only Naddo's never gone!

 . . . Goito's vines
 Stand like a cheat detected, . . .
 Ha! wait
 No longer: . . . forward fate!"

BOOK VI.

OPENS with Sordello where they left him, watching the quiet fading of the evening over Ferrara, lost in his own thoughts—

“While eve slow sank
Down the near terrace to the farther bank,
And only one spot left out of the night
Glimmered upon the river opposite—
A breadth of watery heaven like a bay,
A sky-like space of water, ray for ray,
And star for star, one richness where they mixed,
As this and that wing of an angel,”

till aroused from his reverie by the din of the “plain-
ing city.” While the great decision of his life still
seems pending,

“Fate
Paused with this eve ; ere she precipitate
Herself,—put off strange after-thoughts awhile,
That voice, those large hands, that portentous smile,—
What help to pierce the future as the past,
Lay in the plaining city ?

And at last

The main discovery and prime concern,
All that just now imported him to learn,
His truth, like yonder slow moon to complete
Heaven, rose again, and, naked at his feet,
Lighted his old life's every shift and change,
Effort with counter-effort; nor the range
Of each looked wrong, except wherein it checked,
Some other. . . .

The real way seemed made up of all the ways—
Mood after mood of the one mind in him;
Tokens of the existence, bright or dim,
Of a transcendent all-embracing sense
Demanding only outward influence,
A soul, in Palma's phrase, above his soul,
Power to uplift his power,—this moon's control
Over the sea-depths,—and their mass had swept
Onward from the beginning, and still kept
Its course."

But, alas! all these years his sky had held no moon
to control the varying tides of his being;

"And so, untasked by any love,
His sensitiveness idled,"

his power was frittered away in foam-showers,

"Not gathered up and hurled
Right from its heart, encompassing the world."

So Sordello had been without a function. Others
with not half his strength, who yet had some core
within,—some controlling moon in their sky,—some

Love, some Hate even, which gave a purpose to their lives,

“ Were able, therefore, to fulfil a course,
Nor missed life's crown ; ”

—but Sordello had none.

“ Not that a Palma's Love,
A Salinguerra's Hate, would equal prove
To swaying all Sordello ; ” but “ wherefore doubt
That Love meet for such Strength, some moon
without

Would match his sea ?—or fear, Good manifest,
Only the Best breaks faith !—Ah, but the Best
Somehow eludes us ever, still might be
And is not ! ”

Perchance we are

“ Over-fond
In arguing, from Good the Best, from force
Divided—force combined.”

What if there be no external power adequate to the task ?

“ And he stand forth ordained (a prouder fate)
A law to his own sphere ?—need to remove
All incompleteness, for that law, that love ?
. . . Stronger vision could endure
The unbodied want : no bauble for a truth !
The People were himself.”

Can he boast, then, that he forsakes himself in succouring the Guelfs ?

"No! All's himself; all service, therefore, rates
 Alike, nor serving one part, immolates
 The rest: but all in time!"

He has possibilities in him of higher service—

" 'That lance of yours
 Makes havoc soon with Malek and his Moors.' "

But what if the service " 'next half-month lacks,' "
 be but

" 'Mere sturdy exercise of mace and axe
 To cleave this dismal brake of prickly-pear,' "

which must be felled first; that done,

" 'We'll try

The picturesque achievements by-and-by—
 Next life! ' . . .

Down sank the People's Then; uprose their Now.
 These sad ones render service to! And how
 Piteously little must that service prove
 —Had surely proved in any case!"

Even supposing he has surprised a truth which it were
 service to impart—it takes a lifetime to enchain this
 one truth for the poor crowd's benefit; and before the
 crowd pronounces this one captured, he has descried
 another, twice its size, waiting to be captured, if he
 have lives enough to do it!

"Then Mantua called

Back to his mind how certain bards were thrall'd,"
 like

"Spendthrifts in the Spring, no Summer greets;"

who while

“The prime

Of truth, the very truth which, loosed, had hurled
The world's course right, was really in the world,"

were yet

“Content the while with some mean spark by dint
Of some chance-blow, the solitary hint
Of buried fire, which, rip its breast, would stream
Skyward.”

Well, his own

“ Miserable gleam

Was looked for at the moment : he would dash
This badge, and all it brought, to earth,—abash
Taurello thus, perhaps persuade him wrest
The Kaiser from his purpose,—would attest
His own belief, in any case. Before
He dashes it, however, think once more !
For, were that little, truly service ? ‘ Ay—
I’ the end, no doubt ; but meanwhile ?

. . . No dispute,

'Twere fittest maintain the Guelfs in rule :
That makes your life's work,'"

—but to school your day's work upon that!—hate what you loved, love what you hated, simply as it hindered or helped the Guelf cause!

“ ‘Smite

Or spare so much on warrant all so slight?
The Present's complete sympathies to break,
Aversions bear with, for a Future's sake

So feeble? . . .

This were work, true—but work performed at cost
Of other work; aught gained here, elsewhere lost.
For a new segment spoil an orb half-done?
Rise with the People one step, and sink—one?

. . . Thrust Beauty then aside
And banish Evil! Wherefore? After all,
Is Evil a result less natural
Than Good?"

What knits you to the people but their sorrow?

"Any free from it
Were also free from you! . . .
Nay, mount
Yet higher—and upon men's own account
Must Evil stay."

Did not Goito with its perfect things pall upon
himself? Does not salvation spring for mankind
from every hindrance? Why, Sordello, renounce
your own joy in order that all may arrive at joy?
Reverse the process: claim your own individual joy as
a pioneer of the race. Why should they grudge that
you get yours a little sooner than they?

"Speed their Then"—
their future joy—by all means,

"But how
This badge would suffer you improve your Now!"
—men would win little by your giving it up—you

would lose all. So Sordello juggles with his own soul.

“His time of action for, against, or with
Our world . . . grew, that eventide,
Gigantic with its power of joy, beside
The world's eternity of impotence
To profit though at his whole joy's expense.
‘Make nothing of my day because so brief?’” he
asks.

“‘Rather make more. . . .

And e'en though somewhat smart the Crowd for
this,

Contribute each his pang to make your bliss,
'Tis but one pang. . . . Oh life, life-breath,
Life-blood,—ere sleep, come travail, life ere death !
. . . . Wait

For some transcendent life reserved by Fate
To follow this? Oh, never! . . . 'Twere too absurd
to slight

For the hereafter the to-day's delight!
Quench thirst at this, then seek next well-spring:
wear

Home-lilies ere strange lotus in my hair!
Here is the Crowd, whom I with freest heart
Offer to serve, contented for my part
To give life up in service,—only grant
That I *do* serve; if otherwise, why want
Aught further of me? If men cannot choose
But set aside life, why should I refuse
The gift? I take it—I, for one, engage
Never to falter through my pilgrimage. . . .

. . . I, for one,
 Will praise the world, you style mere anteroom
 To the palace—be it so! . . . Why,
 Admitted to the Presence by-and-by,
 Should thought of having lost these make me
 grieve

Among new joys I reach, for joys I leave? . . .
 Rather, were heaven to forestall earth, I'd say
 I, is it, must be blessed? Then, my own way
 Bless me! Give firmer arm and fleeter foot,
 I'll thank you: but to no mad wings transmute
 These limbs of mine — our greensward was so
 soft!

.
 Life! Yet the very cup whose extreme dull
 Dregs even, I would quaff, was dashed, at full
 Aside so oft; the death I fly, revealed
 So oft a better life this life concealed,
 And which sage, champion, martyr, through each
 path
 Have hunted fearlessly—the horrid bath,
 The crippling-irons and the fiery chair.
 'Twas well for them; let me become aware
 As they, and I relinquish life, too! Let
 What masters life disclose itself!"

But all that I know really is what I feel.

"So much is truth to me. What Is, then? Since
 One object, viewed diversely, may evince
 Beauty and ugliness—this way attract,
 That way repel,—why gloze upon the fact?



Why must a single of the sides be right?
 What bids choose this and leave the opposite?
 Where's abstract Right for me?'"

And so—

"As in moments when the past
 Gave partially enfranchisement, he cast
 Himself quite through mere secondary states
 Of his soul's essence, little loves and hates,
 Into the mid deep yearnings overlaid
 By these; as who should pierce hill, plain, grove,
 glade,

And on into the very nucleus probe
 That first determined there exist a globe.
 As that were easiest, half the globe dissolved,
 So seemed Sordello's closing-truth evolved
 By his flesh-half's break up; the sudden swell
 Of his expanding soul showed Ill and Well,
 Sorrow and Joy, Beauty and Ugliness,
 Virtue and Vice, the Larger and the Less,
 All qualities, in fine, recorded here,
 Might be but modes of Time and this one sphere,
 Urgent on these, but not of force to bind
 Eternity, as Time;—as Matter—Mind.

... Once this understood,
 As suddenly he felt himself alone,
 Quite out of Time and this world: all was known.
 What made the secret of his old despair?"

—that he had tried to let the Soul sublime matter beyond what was intended in the existing scheme of things. How must sorrow be avoided? By fitting his

infinity to his finite surroundings, by suiting the infinite Soul to the bounded Body. His error had been, that in order to be complete for the whole series of spheres—that is, Eternity—his Soul had exceeded its prescribed boundaries amid earthly conditions, and so become practically incomplete even for this single sphere of Time. But is this inevitable?

"Is the cloud of hindrance broke
But by the failing of the fleshly yoke,
Its loves and hates, as now when death lets soar
Sordello? . . .
Must life be ever just escaped, which should
Have been enjoyed?"

Is there no way of ordering life so that soul and body
may complement each other?

"Like yonder breadth of watery heaven, a bay,
And that sky-space of water, ray for ray,
And star for star—one richness where they mixed
As this and that wing of an angel. . . .
. . . Never may some soul see All
—The Great Before and After, and the Small
Now, yet be saved by this the simplest lore,
And take the single course prescribed before,
As the king-bird with ages on his plumes
Travels to die in his ancestral glooms?
But where descry the Love that shall select
That course?"

Here is a soul (our Sordello), on whom Nature has plied
all her means to teach that love to—and failed.

“ Ah my Sordello, I this once befriend
And speak for you. Of a Power above you still
Which, utterly incomprehensible,
Is out of rivalry, which thus you can
Love, though unloving all conceived by man—
What need !” And
“ Of a Power its representative
Who, being for authority the same,
Communication different, should claim
A course, the first chose and this last revealed—
This Human clear, as that Divine concealed—
What utter need !”

But what has Sordello found now ?—when Salinguerra
and Palma reach the threshold, and dash the veil aside
—to find him—dead.

“ Under his foot the badge : still, Palma said,
A triumph lingering in the wide eyes,
Wider than some spent swimmer’s if he spies
Help from above in his extreme despair,
And, head far back on shoulder thrust, turns there
With short, quick, passionate cry.”

“ Can his spirit go the mighty round,
End where poor Eglamor began ?—So, says
Old fable, the two eagles went two ways
About the world : where, in the midst, they met,
Though on a shifting waste of sand, men set
Jove’s temple. Quick, what has Sordello found ?”

Has he found motive at last for the Human Love in
the Divine, impulse sufficient for the humble service

Who ever, just as they prepare ascend
 Spiral on spiral, wish thee well, impend
 Thy frank delight at their exclusive track,
 That upturned fervid face and hair put back !

Is there no more to say ? "

Did Sordello die at once for men ? No ; chroniclers
 of Mantua tired their pens with heroic tales of him,
 till he passed, with posterity,

" For just the god he never could become."

While all the same,

" What he should have been,
 Could be, and was not—the one step too mean
 For him to take,—we suffer at this day
 Because of : Ecelin had pushed away
 Its chance ere Dante could arrive and take
 The step Sordello spurned, for the world's sake :
 He did much—but Sordello's chance was gone.
 Thus, had Sordello dared that step alone,
 Apollo had been compassed. . . . Had he embraced
 Their cause then, men had plucked Hesperian fruit
 And, praising that, just thrown him in to boot
 All he was anxious to appear, but scarce
 Solicitous to be. A sorry farce
 Such life is, after all ! Cannot I say
 He lived for some one better thing ? this way."—

A barefoot rosy child climbing the dewy hillsides by
 sparkling Asolo

" Singing all the while

Some unintelligible words to beat
The lark, God's poet, swooning at his feet,
So worsted is he at 'the few fine locks
Stained like pale honey oozed from topmost rocks
Sun-blached the livelong summer,'—all that's left
Of the Goito lay! And thus bereft,
Sleep and forget, Sordello! In effect
He sleeps, the feverish poet—I suspect
Not utterly companionless; but, friends,
Wake up! The ghost's gone, and the story ends
I'd fain hope, sweetly."

A nature of magnificent possibilities, whose work for the world was lost, though he himself saved, we may trust, as by fire,—just for the want of a Love, Divine enough to inspire and give motive for, Human enough to direct and control its service for the world.

"Who would has heard Sordello's story told."

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